

Terms and Conditions

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Terms and Conditions

by [Rckyfrk](#)

Summary

It was Beth's first time in Atlanta by herself when the world decided to end. When she lost her way home, she winds up meeting a crossbow-toting man with steel blue eyes and a smile that gives her chills. This is not your typical Bethyl story - imagine if Daryl were more like Merle.

Chapter 1

It all happened so fast. Beth had been so excited to be able to go to Atlanta all on her own to meet up with some friends for a birthday shopping spree. Her mom had given Beth her credit card to use, asking her to keep it under \$200. It was supposed to be such a great day.

One minute she was doing her best to navigate the streets of downtown Atlanta, listening carefully to her phone's GPS directions, her favorite CD playing softly in the background. The next minute, when the last track played, she ejected the disc and went to replace it, the radio station came through the speakers as she did so; a message from the Emergency Broadcast System was warning everyone to vacate major cities and take shelter, making sure to avoid any suspicious looking people.

Beth's heart began beating in her throat. A glance at the sidewalks on either side of her showed a flood of people running in and out of buildings. Several people were carrying bundles of clothes, others sacks of food. She nearly screamed when the first round of gunshots went off and nervously checked and rechecked that the car's doors were all locked. She frantically grabbed her phone and reversed the directions to get back home.

The only response her phone gave her was the little spinning circle of doom. Apparently no connection could be made. She looked around in panic, trying to find a way to turn back toward the interstate that would take her home. Traffic crawled along, cars pulling haphazardly from lane to lane, everyone out for themselves. More and more pedestrians were walking between cars now with little to no regard for their own safety.

She almost threw up when she realized they were all gravely injured, all of them with a vacant yet hungry look on their faces, all of them with fresh looking bite marks – wounds that no one should be able to survive and be able to walk around with. She checked to make sure her doors were locked one more time before ignoring the traffic light in front of her and sped into the intersection, determined to get herself to safety.

She found herself in the industrial part of town, certain that somewhere nearby would be a turn off to get onto the interstate. Any highway would suffice at this point; Beth just wanted to get home. Finally she found the interstate, but the traffic built up to get to the on-ramp was backed up for several blocks on each side. She resigned herself to waiting, knowing that no amount of honking or revving her engine would help matters. Instead she tried again and again to reach her parents on the house phone, but again, the phone couldn't connect – "All circuits are busy," the voice on the other line told her. Beth began to pray, trying to keep calm, realizing that getting herself worked up would only make things worse.

Hours passed before her tires finally touched the pavement of the interstate. The cars around her inched along, but she figured any movement was good. She'd at least been smart enough to turn off the car each time they stopped in an effort to save gas. The downside to that was she was forced to roll down her windows in the stifling Georgia heat. She forced herself to only roll them down an inch or so to keep anyone from being able to reach in and grab at her – something she'd seen plenty of on her way out of the downtown area.

The highway wound away from the city and toward farmland and wooded areas, none of which looked familiar to Beth. The sun was high in the sky, beating down from directly above her, and Beth was positively sweltering in her car. She opened her sunroof, knowing that it would only let more sun in, but would hopefully let some of the hot and humid air out and provide a little more circulation. She rummaged through her messenger bag, thankful she thought to grab a granola bar and bottle of water before she left this morning. She wasn't hungry, not yet, but it was good to know they were there.

The cars ahead were no longer moving. Beth watched as more and more people got out of their cars, trying to glean any information from those just as clueless around them. Some even began unpacking their cars and walking, figuring that would be the only way they'd make any progress getting away from the city. The thought crossed Beth's mind, but without any kind of map and no way of knowing how to get back home from this particular highway, she decided to stay put and hope for the best.

Hours had passed, and the granola bar was starting to sound awfully tempting. Then she heard them. The screams. The groans. It was like a horror movie her brother Shawn had forced her to watch, but these weren't monsters – they were people.

'Were' was apparently the key word. A glance in her rearview mirror became a prolonged stare as she watched a man try to fight off another bite victim...and lose. She sat horrified, unable to look away, as the attacker *ate* the man...while he was still screaming for help. These were not human beings but some kind of monster, and Beth was absolutely terrified.

Beth scrunched down in her seat and sat stock still, praying that if she didn't move, no one would see her. She was wrong.

A pair of bloody hands slammed against her window, clawing at the opening, accompanied by a gaping mouth between them, growling and gnashing its teeth. Beth couldn't help but let out a scream of sheer terror, which only riled it up even further. She looked to the passenger door to escape, but saw a second attacker had found her, this one a woman several years older than she was. She stayed in her seat, praying that they'd just leave on their own. Beth pulled her messenger bag into her lap, squeezed her eyes shut, and prayed.

It was the sound of glass cracking that forced her eyes open again. Another of these human monsters had joined the first on her left and together they were about to shatter her window.

Beth tried taking deep breaths, fighting the panic rising in her, looking for anything she could use to protect herself, but there was nothing. She could picture the baseball bat sitting in her trunk – a fat lot of good it did her there. She leaned her head back against the seat's headrest and looked up, saying one last prayer...

...before climbing through her sunroof.

There on the roof of her car, she was at least out of her attackers' reach, but she couldn't stay there forever. She noticed that they moved relatively slowly and decided she could try outrunning them. She vaulted onto the hood of her trunk and slid onto the pavement, making a beeline for the side of the highway, over the barricade lining the road, and into the woods beyond.

She ran...and ran...and ran. Never in her life did she think she'd be thankful for Coach Hanratty for making her class run the mile twice a week for the last three years of her high school career. She focused on breathing and ignored the burning in her legs. Finally she could run no further and was forced to stop to catch her breath.

Even though she was standing in place, she was constantly in motion, looking for people, whether they were monsters to run from or others like her that might help her survive. Seeing no one, she tried to think of what to do next. The sun was starting to get low in the sky, and as far as she knew, there was no shelter nearby – none that she knew would be safe anyway. Her best option appeared to be finding a tree to climb and get high enough to be out of the reach of anything...or anyone.

She spent the night in the crook of a large Georgia Maple, nibbling on her granola bar and sipping on her bottle of water to make them last as long as she could. She had hardly slept at all, afraid of what might happen if she were to close her eyes. As the night passed, she watched as different forest critters scampered here and there below her. One human monster walked right under her tree, but didn't seem to notice her, which she considered a blessing.

Her stomach was beginning to make god-awful noises; in fact, her entire abdomen was one big ball of pain. She hadn't gone to the bathroom in hours and her bladder felt like it was about to burst. Taking one more look at her surroundings, she deemed it safe enough to climb down and relieve herself.

When she had finished, biting back a sigh, she stood up and pulled up her shorts.

"Well, well, well. Lookie what we got here." A voice with a rough southern drawl surprised her from behind. She gasped loudly, her scream choked off by the fear coursing through her.

Standing before her was a man pointing a crossbow at her, though not necessarily aiming it at her. He was older than her by at least fifteen years, with steel blue eyes, and hair that looked like he'd cut it himself with a knife rather than scissors. Aside from the weapon he held comfortably in his arms, the most dangerous part about him was the smile that crossed his features.

"Please," she said softly, trying not to cry and show this man just how scared she was, "please, don't hurt me. I need help. I was in Atlanta trying to get home and I got lost and I'm hungry and I don't know..."

"Save it," he barked, lowering his crossbow and stepping through the brush toward her. Beth automatically stepped back, only to have her back meet the tree behind her. He laughed at her startled gasp and continued advancing on her. He looked her up and down, and it gave her a bad feeling in her gut. "You got anything? Any weapons? Food?"

"No, sir."

"Tell you what," he said after a long moment. "Y'all can come back with me. We got a group o' people, men, women and children, up by the quarry, holdin' out til this blows over. I'll take care a ya, won't let none o' them fuckers get ya."

Beth let out the breath she'd been holding since he'd shown up. "Oh my gosh, thank you! Really, I..."

"Hey, hey, blondie," he interrupted again. "Don't get too excited. I ain't no knight in shining armor here. Ain't nothing comes for free," he said, looking her over once again. She felt like he was sizing her up for something, and she fought the shiver threatening to overtake her body.

"I...I can cook," she stammered. "And sew." Maybe her small skillset would make him see her as more than what she thought he was.

The man nodded. "Well," he began, the lecherous grin returning to his face, "I'm sure we can work something out."

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Daryl presents Beth with an offer that she could, and probably should, refuse, but ultimately can't.

Chapter Notes

We are picking up immediately from where we left off last chapter. I just want to remind you lovely readers that everything in this story will be consensual, but reluctance plays a big part. Please keep in mind that I love Beth and Daryl so so much and never want anything bad to happen to either of them. Also please remember that I'm a sucker for happy endings, and while this may not be the fluffiest story ever, it'll all be okay in the end.

Thank you for all the support I've gotten so far, for all the comments, favorites and followers. It all means so very much to me - it really does! And without any further ado...

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

He looked her over once more. "How old're you, anyways?" Daryl asked, narrowing his eyes.

Beth frowned, not sure why that mattered, "I just turned eighteen."

Daryl nodded, apparently pleased with her answer, then started walking down an unseen path. He turned and called over his shoulder, "This way. Try not to make too much noise."

His steps through the forest were so sure and nearly silent that it took a lot of effort for Beth not only to keep up with him, but to do her best and stay quiet. After close to an hour of following him, she finally spoke. "Sir? I've only had a granola bar since yesterday morning. I don't think I can go much further."

"Well, what the hell you want, a piggy back?" he shot back at her, though he'd stopped to give her a chance to catch her breath.

"I...I was hoping you might have something to eat?" She felt stupid asking, but her head was starting to spin and her legs could barely support her anymore, not to mention the nauseous,

shaky feeling spreading from her stomach and the cold sweat that was forming on the back of her neck.

He shot her a mean look, “I look like a damn 7-Eleven to you?” He sighed heavily and pushed her back against a tree, then down on her shoulder, plopping her on the ground. “Wait here. Don’t move.” Beth couldn’t help but close her eyes, exhaustion rushing through her. She might have even fallen asleep, though within minutes the man had returned, holding a red bandana wrapped around what ended up being several berries. She looked up at him with a questioning look. “Don’t worry, they’re safe. I ain’t gonna poison you. The hell you take me for?”

Beth carefully took the small bundle from him, whispering a “thank you,” and forced herself to eat the fruit slowly, letting each berry burst on her tongue, savoring the tart flavor. After a few minutes, she let the berries sit in her lap and took a long look at her would-be protector while he was busy keeping watch. She decided he wasn’t awful looking, just...rough. His whole persona seemed guarded and on edge, yet comfortable enough in his surroundings, as if he’d led a hard life and these human monsters now plaguing the earth were just one more thing to deal with. Finally she broke the silence. “What’s your name?”

He turned and looked at her, studying her for a minute before answering. “Daryl. Dixon,” he added after a pause. It was the kindest his voice had sounded so far.

“Daryl,” she repeated back to him. “I’m Beth. Beth Greene.” She would have offered her hand for a handshake as she was taught, trying to be polite, but he was several steps away and didn’t seem interested in moving any closer or all that interested in keeping up formalities like manners. “You from Atlanta?”

“Nah.”

“Oh,” she said quietly. “Me neither. My daddy has a farm just outside of Senoia.” He only grunted in response. “You really know how to use that thing?” He stared at her, not giving an answer. “Your crossbow. I’ve never seen anyone who actually knows how to shoot one. My daddy and Otis, he’s one of our neighbors, they both have...”

“You talk too damn much,” he cut her off.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered and continued eating her berries. “Did you want any?” she asked before she started gobbling the whole pile down.

“Nah.”

Beth sighed and quietly finished her meal, having a one-sided mental conversation with Daryl as she ate, wanting to tell him that while she may talk a lot, at least she was trying to be friendly. When she’d eaten the last berry, she stood up and brushed off her backside; she looked up and saw that Daryl had already continued walking through the brush, somehow knowing exactly where he was going, so she rushed to catch up with him. She tapped him on the shoulder, startling him momentarily, and handed him his bandana. He only scoffed and stuffed the fabric into the back pocket of his jeans before setting off through the woods again.

Along the way, Daryl would pause and aim his crossbow at seemingly nothing, but each time he stopped and fired, he'd go and retrieve the bolt, instructing her to stay where she was, and he would return with a freshly killed squirrel tied to a rope that was now slung over his arm. It looked like he had quite a few already, and Beth wondered just how many people he was going to be sharing them with. She was also curious how squirrel tasted, and figured she'd be finding out later that evening when they reached his camp.

They finally broke through the tree line into a large clearing filled with tents, cars, clothes lines, small fire pits, and even an RV. There were close to twenty people occupying the area doing various tasks around the camp, though Daryl didn't bother introducing Beth to any of them. She noticed they were set up in small groups, most likely families who'd escaped together, many of them with children. Several watched her as she followed Daryl through the camp, most looking scared, none showing any signs of welcome.

Daryl led her to a small, well-used tent on the edge of the clearing, dropping off his rope of squirrels with an older, bearded man sitting outside the RV along the way. "Home, sweet home," he grumbled as he held the flap open for Beth to crawl through.

Inside there were two sleeping bags, an assortment of knives and guns lining the walls of the tent, two large duffle bags, and not much else. There was a distinctly masculine odor that Beth guessed no amount of Febreeze would ever get out. "You an' me'll share that one," he mumbled, gesturing to the sleeping bag on the left.

"Share?" Beth asked nervously. He looked at her with a raised eyebrow, giving her the feeling that she should have known before he'd even said anything. "Who uses the other one?"

"M'brother, Merle," he said as he set his crossbow down in the corner nearest the entrance. He dug through one of the bags and pulled out a Ziploc baggie half full of beef jerky, which she almost missed when he tossed it to her. "I'm sure you'll meet him soon enough." Beth wasn't sure she liked the sound of that. "Don't worry, he won't bite. 'Less ya wan' him to," he added as an afterthought. She definitely didn't like what he was implying.

"Is, um...is that your clothes?" she gestured at the duffel bag at the foot of his sleeping bag, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah," he grunted as he sat and stretched out on the sleeping bag, crossing one ankle over the other almost as a show of carefree confidence, like a display of authority within those nylon walls.

"Do you have any detergent?" She hadn't noticed a bottle anywhere.

"Ain't got none. Maybe one of the ladies in camp'll let ya use some a theirs."

Beth sat nervously near his feet, tucking her knees up under her chin. "Will you show me where they do laundry?"

"Ain't gonna be tonight. 'Sides, ain't got that much ta worry about just yet anyhow."

She took a piece of jerky out of the packaging and bit into it. As she chewed, she tried to sneak a peek into the duffel bag, seeing mostly hints of flannel of various colors. Beth looked over her shoulder at him with a sudden realization, "I don't have anything. No clothes or anything. Just what I got on now."

Daryl was nonchalantly picking at his fingernails, propping himself up on one elbow. "Figured as much. Couple guys are talkin' 'bout makin' a run into town in a couple days, pick up some blankets, food, anythin' they can find, really. I'll see if they can't get ya somethin'." He nodded at the duffel bag, "If ya need ta, ya can borrow whatever I got that'll fit ya." He finally looked up, letting his eyes meet hers, that same wicked grin crossing his face. "For a price," he added on.

Beth was suddenly hyperaware of her shirt, soaked with sweat and sticking to her skin, and miles from being laundry fresh. She gulped down her nervousness to ask, "What...what do you want?"

"Just a little kiss, darlin'" he answered, obviously trying to make his request sound innocent.

Beth's mouth went dry. "I..." she stammered, "I have a boyfriend."

Daryl's eyebrows shot up, "Already? Here at camp? Damn, girl, you move fast."

"No," she shook her head, "at home."

He sat up a little straighter, "Guess you didn't hear when I said, 'Home, sweet home,' didja? 'Sides, any little boy toy you got back on the farm is prob'ly half-eaten by now."

"I...I can't...I'm..."

"Hey," he said conciliatorily, "ya don't hafta change if ya don't want to. Hell, you don't even hafta stay with me...though I'm not sure anyone else is gonna wanna take in another mouth ta feed or one more person to watch over. Come ta think of it, me an' Merle prob'ly gonna do most-a the huntin' anyway, and ain't none a them gonna be able ta keep ya safer'n me." He chuckled, "Hell, they were still shootin' them fuckers in the chest til me an' Merle taught 'em different. It's gotta be the brain," he told her, pointing two fingers at his temple. "Most of 'em can't aim for shit, so the damn things gotta get right up on 'em before they can kill 'em." He shot her a look letting her know exactly what he thought of the rest of the inhabitants of the camp.

Beth sat there, nervously working her lower lip between her teeth, realizing just what she'd gotten herself into. "You said we could work something out...back in the forest where you found me. What...what did you mean?"

Daryl gave her a knowing look, one that sent chills down her spine. "Me an' you," he said, no trace of that smile on his stern face any longer. "I figure I keep you safe, keep you fed, three meals a day, you cook what I bring back, take care of laundry when we need it, and us..." he nodded at the sleeping bag, "three times a week...unless you end up wantin' more."

"Th...three times?"

“Well, damn girl,” he started to get angry, his voice raising in volume, “three meals a day for three times a week? I think I’m bein’ more than generous. I’ll even go easy on ya and say it don’t even have to be us bumpin’ uglies. Long as you can get me off, we’ll be even.”

Neither of them spoke or moved for several minutes, Daryl apparently giving her time to think it over. Judging by the looks she got while she was walking through the camp, he was right – no one was going to be too thrilled at having to provide for her, regardless of any skills she might have. Leaving on her own wasn’t even an option; she had no idea where she was or what direction she needed to go to even get close to finding her family again...if they were still alive, not to mention she had no way of defending or feeding herself. Still, she’d never done much more than kissing with any of her boyfriends (not that there were all that many to begin with). Now she was supposed to do *that* with basically a stranger? ‘He said I just have to get him off...maybe I can stop us from doing that long enough to find my family,’ she thought.

How else was she supposed to survive?

Accepting her fate, she whispered, “Can...can I change into one of your shirts?” not trusting her voice to come out without shaking.

He smirked and leaned across her to drag the duffel bag in front of him. As he did, they were suddenly incredibly close, and her heart started beating in her throat. He dug through the bag and pulled out a flannel button down shirt with the sleeves ripped off and dropped it in her lap. “That oughta work. You can do that thing where ya tie it off if it’s too long on ya.”

Beth picked up the garment and stood up, turning to face the corner in an effort to keep some of her modesty while she changed.

“Ah-ah-ah,” he sing-songed mockingly. “Pay up, princess.”

She turned around to see him standing, that wicked grin back on his face. Hands shaking, heart racing, she took timid steps forward until she was squared off with him in the middle of the tent. Beth scrunched her eyes shut and went up on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek.

“You wanna try that again? Hardly worth a nice clean shirt, don’t ya think?”

She puffed out a breath in an attempt to keep herself from crying, then tilted her chin up with her eyes closed, waiting for him to kiss her like he apparently wanted to. She expected him to be rough, demanding, forceful, and braced herself for the worst.

Instead, the kiss was light, at least at the beginning. His lips were deceptively soft, as were the hands that slid up her arms and rested on the sides of her neck; his forefingers ran along the length of her jawline, his thumbs grazing over the apple of her cheeks. He ever so slightly tilted her head opposite his, in complete control as he applied more pressure to her lips. He caught her lower lip between hers, nipping at her ever so slightly with his teeth as he moaned against her.

He pulled away, only to murmur, “Come on, princess. I can’t be doin’ all the work here,” before kissing her again.

She brought up a shaky hand and gently curled her fingers into the fabric of his shirt, if anything just for something to hold on to. She pushed her mouth against his, kissing him back, letting her lips barely slip apart before he took advantage and licked into her mouth, his tongue just brushing against hers. He tasted of cigarettes, but there was something else, something spicy and warm, that had her tentatively seek out his tongue again. She felt him smile against her before he claimed her mouth, though not overbearingly so. He pulled back, ending the kiss, dropping one last peck on her now swollen lips.

Beth took a shaky breath in and released it slowly. No one had ever kissed her like that before. If she weren't so terrified of what this man could do to her, and what he was already doing to her, she would have sworn she felt...something...something that wasn't anything like the disgust she thought she would feel...should be feeling.

Neither of them moved from where they stood. Daryl only gestured with his chin toward the corner. "Go ahead and get changed. Gonna go clean a couple squirrels for ya to cook up for dinner." His voice was a low growl, but there wasn't a trace of threat in it.

Beth nodded, numbly, and moved with shaky knees back to the corner. She pulled her arms out of her sleeves, leaving the body of the shirt to hang from her neck, keeping her chest decently covered, as she shoved her arms into the arm holes of Daryl's flannel. She had just pulled her sweaty and grimy shirt over her head and started buttoning the flannel when someone yanked the tent flap open and burst in with a loud yet raspy voice.

"Hoo-ee, baby brother, what we got here?"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading - please leave a review

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Beth spun around and gasped, wrapping the front panels of the shirt tightly around her torso, hiding her body the best she could. The man before her was older than Daryl by at least ten years and built much stockier. Even if he hadn't called Daryl his baby brother, she'd have known the two men were related by the same steely blue eyes that Daryl had and the same gruffness they carried.

Merle was now sizing her up, even going so far as licking his lips while he did so. "Where you come from, sugar tits? Ain't seen you 'round camp before."

Daryl moved in front of her, putting himself between the two of them. "Leave 'er alone, Merle. She ain't none a yer concern."

"Wha'?' I's just askin' where she came from," he defended. "'Sides, she's in my tent, I say that makes 'er my concern."

"No," Daryl said flatly, "it doesn't."

Merle smirked at him, gauging his brother's reactions so far. He peered over Daryl's shoulder to talk to Beth, "What's yer name, girlie?"

"It *ain't* yer..." Daryl cut himself off when he felt Beth's hand on his shoulder and turned to look at her.

By this time she'd buttoned her shirt, so she felt comfortable enough to walk out from behind Daryl. "I'm Beth."

Merle's face split with a devilish smile, "Now, was that so hard?" He glanced back over to Daryl with a look of mocking pride. "So, ya finally got yerself a piece a tail that weren't one of my hand me downs. The hell'd you come from?" he directed at her, still glancing back and forth between the two of them as if to see what kind of reaction he could get out of Daryl.

"Found 'er in the woods," Daryl growled out through clenched teeth.

Merle released a loud belly laugh. "Well, ain't you a sweet one, savin' a pretty little thing like this from the biters an' bringin' 'er back fer ol' Merle."

Daryl straightened his back and squared his shoulders. "She ain't fer you."

The smile left Merle's face without a trace. "Now hold on there, baby brother, you know the rules. Everythin' we got, we share."

"Not her." There was no misunderstanding his tone – this was non-negotiable.

“Now look here, boy. I didn’t mean at the same time. Hell, looks like she’s got a lot to learn, anyhow. Didn’t know you were into young’uns. Tell you what. You let ol’ Merle break ‘er in, then you can...”

The rest of his plan was lost when Daryl punched him square in the mouth. Merle glared daggers at him as he righted himself and wiped the blood from his split lip with the back of his hand. Beth took a step back behind Daryl, not wanting to get caught in the middle if they started fighting. “The fuck you thinkin’, boy?”

“I said, *not...her*. We got...an arrangement.”

Beth felt a rush of heat cross her cheeks when he said that. Even if he hadn’t gone into detail, hearing it said out loud had made Beth feel shameful. What was worse was that Daryl was clearly holding up his end of the bargain, protecting her from even his own brother, so she’d have no choice now but to accept his terms.

Merle spat on the ground and mumbled something along the lines of “pussy-whipped bastard” as he threw the flap of the tent open and stormed outside.

Daryl turned and glared at Beth, who could only blink back at him. “Tonight,” he said after a moment, his voice low and gravelly, leaving no room for discussion, and nodded toward the sleeping bag. “And you don’t leave my side the rest of the day.” Beth nodded, breathing shallow to try to keep herself from crying. She followed when Daryl left the tent, through the clearing to the RV parked on the edge of the camping area.

The same bearded man was sitting in his lawn chair. He’d been untying the squirrels Daryl had dropped off with him. “Didn’t get a chance to thank ya earlier,” he said with an easy smile, “but on behalf of the rest of us, thanks for dinner.” He looked over at Beth, “Who do we have here?”

“This’s Beth,” Daryl mumbled. “Found ‘er lost in the woods. She’s gonna be stayin’ with me.”

The older man’s eyebrows shot up, high on his forehead, but if he thought anything ill of Daryl’s statement, he didn’t make it known other than that. “Beth,” he said with the same easy smile. “Dale Horvath,” he said as he stood and offered a hand for her to shake. Beth gave a tiny smile and shook the man’s hand, returning to Daryl’s side when they had finished.

“Just came by ta grab a couple a these for dinner,” Daryl explained, gesturing to the squirrels laying on the ground.

“Of course,” Dale answered. “You did the work, you get first pick.” Daryl scoffed and grabbed two from the pile and headed back to his tent.

“What about Merle?” Beth wondered out loud.

Daryl snorted, “He can get his own damn dinner.” He turned to face her, “Ya ain’t gotta do shit fer him. It ain’t his ass gonna be keepin’ you alive.” He held the squirrels out to her by their tails, “You ever skin one ‘a these before?”

Beth shook her head, “No. Never cooked anything over a campfire besides marshmallows, either. Daddy always brought a grill when we went camping.”

Daryl rolled his eyes before fixing her with a look of incredulity. Nonetheless, he gave her a crash course in preparing food over the open flame, making sure she knew how to start a fire herself for the next day. “We keep the flame pretty small. Don’t wanna attract any attention from walkers or other people.” Beth did her best to commit everything he was telling her to memory, asking questions along the way. To his credit, Daryl answered all of them patiently. Once they’d both finished eating, Daryl motioned for them to return to the tent.

Beth’s stomach was in knots, her heart pounding nervously. He’d said he was expecting something from her tonight – did he mean sex right away? Would he be okay with her working her way up to that? What was she willing to do instead? She stayed out of his way as he got their side of the tent ready for bed, unrolling the sleeping bag and opening up the zipper and laying it flat so there would be room for both.

“Too damn hot to sleep bundled up in that thing anyway,” he muttered. “Not that he’ll try anything, but I’d rather have it so Merle’d have to go through me to get to you, so hop in,” he gestured at the sleeping bag. Beth tiptoed into the makeshift bed while Daryl grumbled, “Asshole thinks I’m sharin’ you with him he’s got another thing comin’.” She fought a chill that threatened to run down her back at the mere idea of such a thing actually happening and was glad Daryl was of the same mind as she was on the matter. He made an impatient sound and she hurried to the far side of the sleeping bag, up against the tent wall, and sat, not sure what to do next.

Beth started to untie her shoes when he stopped her, “What the hell you think yer doin’?” She blinked up at him, not seeing her apparently obvious mistake. “Only an idiot takes their shoes off when yer sleepin’ outside. The hell you gonna do if somethin’ comes up an’ attacks the camp? Ask ‘em to wait fer you ta tie yer shoes?” Beth bit her lip, trying not to cry for what seemed like the millionth time that day.

She looked up at him through watery eyes, trying to work up an apology, her breath hitching in her throat as she watched him unbuckle his belt and undo his pants, but left the rest of his clothes, including his boots, where they were before settling next to her. He only had one pillow, though it was so flat it could hardly be recognized as such anymore, on which he plopped his head on, then looked up at her expectantly. “Let’s go, princess,” he muttered when she still didn’t move. She timidly lowered herself, resting her head next to his on the tiny cushion, laying on her back and staring up at the tent ceiling, the only light coming from the dying fire not far from the entrance to the tent.

She flinched when she felt his finger trace up and down the length of her arm, his knuckles grazing along her side, and tried to focus her breathing so she wouldn’t pass out from fear. When she felt brave enough, she turned her head to face him, finding him waiting for her already, his lips seeking hers immediately. The kiss was like the one they shared before – possessive, but not forceful. The man might be rough and tough, lacking in manners and social cues, but his kisses...she’d never felt anything like them. After a moment or two, she found herself unable to stop herself from kissing him back, opening to him when he sought entrance to her mouth. Her body began to betray her reluctance and turned to face him; her

hand came up to rest on his chest, feeling his muscles move beneath her fingers as he dropped an arm around her, pulling her closer to him.

She pulled back instantly, her hand attempting to push him away, when he started to roll on top of her. “Wait,” she pleaded, but the rest of her thought was lost to a loud gasp as he attached his lips to her throat and he began teasing her sensitive skin with his teeth and tongue. She whimpered as he continued, up and down the side of her neck, gulping in air as he made his way down to the base of her throat and up the other side of her neck. She realized that by doing so, he’d succeeded in placing himself above her, his broad chest covering her torso entirely, but the sensations he was causing with his mouth against her skin were too strong, too good, too electric for her to even think about resisting.

Daryl may have been rough and tough, an obviously skilled hunter and fighter, and maybe even rude and crude in his demeanor, but there was no denying he was definitely talented at what he was doing right now, drawing out sensations she’d never experienced before. This was a man who knew what he was doing, and though she knew she should be fearful of what he was requiring of her, she somehow found herself becoming more and more at ease with him.

He lifted himself off her and laid down on his side so they were facing each other again, his strong arm still wrapped around her. His hand cupped the back of her head, his fingers threading themselves through her tangled hair, pulling ever so slightly as he deepened the kiss. He released her to trail his fingers down her throat, still a little sensitive from his ministrations, over her shoulder, before landing on her breast. She ripped her lips away from his, gasping loudly and trying to wriggle away, but that was the only response she could get out before he covered her mouth with his again. He whispered against her lips, “Relax. You can touch me too, ya know,” before sealing another kiss over her mouth.

She felt him gently squeeze her breast again; somewhere in the back of her mind, she was forced to admit that if she hadn’t been so scared, making out with basically a stranger, it would have felt good...really good. That same part reminded her that this man had taken her in, fed her, clothed her, and even defended her against his own brother; he couldn’t be *that* bad – there was at least some good in him. If he’d wanted more from her already, she had no doubt he could force her into doing whatever he wanted, but instead he was taking his time with her, which helped, in a very confusing way. She realized he most likely wasn’t acting under any kind of romantic notions, but that he was just good at what he does.

Still.

Her mind once again gave control over to her body, allowing it to act on instinct. She placed a hesitant hand on his shoulder and over his bicep, noticing the strength he held there. “Not there,” he murmured, taking her wrist and dragging it down his body, stopping when her palm reached the waistband of his boxers.

Beth’s eyes snapped open as she took in another gasp of air. Her fingers were resting on his very much aroused member, hot and hard even through the fabric of his underwear. She pulled her hand away, and he didn’t make any move to force it back to where he had put it. Instead he started nibbling on her neck again and kneading her breast through his flannel shirt. “Daryl, I...” but no words found their way past her tongue. She remembered their deal,

that as long as she could get him off, he'd be satisfied. She swallowed, though her mouth was suddenly dry anyway, and slowly returned her hand to where he'd left it.

Her fingers cupped around the width of him. She didn't have anything to really compare it to – she'd never gone nearly this far with her boyfriend at home – but she guessed he was bigger than average, whatever that meant. She tentatively moved her hand up and down, her fingertips tracing the length of him before reaching the base of his penis. She realized the tip was brushing against her forearm, just past her wrist, indicating that he was...long. She'd never seen a man up close like this, had never seen a dirty movie; the only reference she had was the diagrams in her health and biology books at school. Beth was nervous, scared in fact, and yet intrigued by the feel of him beneath her fingers.

She began to rub up and down his length in short little strokes, gradually increasing in tempo as she became more comfortable with the feel of him in her hand. Daryl started rocking his hips in time with her hand until he ground out, "C'mon, girl, quit teasin'."

She was confused as to what more he wanted. Was he expecting sex because he was so hard already? She started to pull away, but Daryl caught her wrist and brought it back toward his body, sighing impatiently, this time guiding her hand down the front of his boxers, releasing her when her knuckles had reached the elastic waistband.

Beth closed her eyes, not that she could see much in the dim light anyway, and let her fingers wrap around him, her thumb barely able to reach her fingertips. He moaned heavily in her ear, so she figured she must have done something right. Something about the sound gave her a kind of thrill, one she couldn't explain. She knew the mechanics of sex and what he wanted her to do, so she took a breath and forced herself to move her hand along his length, wanting to get this whole thing over with.

As she continued to pump his cock with her hand, he began to move in time with her, rocking his hips to match her rhythm. His moans were interrupted by him whispering tiny praises to her – "Yeah, that's it," and "Mmm, that's good." Occasionally he would tell her to squeeze a little tighter or move a little faster, and she followed his instructions as best as she could. At some point, he had returned his hand to her chest, playing with her breasts in turn, though she figured it was purely for his benefit.

He was breathing heavily in her ear while she was concentrating on keeping her hand moving and her eyes dry. Finally he started to whisper harshly, "'M gonna come, girl. Gonna come all over yer little hand." She felt his hot release stream out of him and onto her wrist and forearm as he let out a strangled sigh against her neck. She grimaced at the feel of it, but made sure her only other reaction was to carefully release him and pull her hand out of his shorts, not quite sure what to do with the mess on her arm.

Before she could move too far, he put his hand on her hip, "Don't move." He rolled onto his back and felt around with his hand for a few seconds before returning to her with some kind of cloth. He reached for her hand and cleaned off the white stickiness from her skin before tossing the cloth back to the opposite side of the tent.

"Was...did you use one of Merle's shirts to...?"

“Asshole needs to learn to put his shit away,” he murmured. Beth thought she might have heard a lightness to his voice, as if he were smiling or even holding back a laugh. She thought it was an awful thing to do – she would never do something like that to her own brother – but didn’t want to risk making him mad by admonishing him, so she decided staying quiet would be best. When he’d finished and tossed the cloth into a corner of the tent, Daryl rolled to his side with his back facing her, and within minutes was softly snoring, without a word of thanks or even a brief ‘good night.’

Beth was left with nothing to do but face the tent wall and lose herself in her thoughts, silent tears streaming down to the pillow beneath her. She wasn’t sure exactly why she was crying; she was scared, that was for sure, and wanted nothing more than to just go home, hoping against all odds that her family was still alive and safe, but there was something more, just under the surface. Her first sexual act had been with a stranger, which made her feel dirty and cheap. Even if they hadn’t actually had sex, she felt some kind of loss of innocence. She knew she wasn’t left with many other options, that this was how she was going to survive, at least for the time being, but she felt she had betrayed some unspoken oath, and would only have to continue to chip away at it if she wanted to go on living.

She realized what she really wanted was some kind of comfort, even from Daryl, even if it was just to return his arms around her and hold her until she slept. Instead she just felt...used.

‘No, Bethy,’ she thought to herself. ‘This is part of the deal. This is what has to happen right now. Until you can find a way out of this little arrangement, this is your life now. Keep him happy with your hand, let him keep touching and kissing you, and just survive until you can somehow make your way back home...or find another way to get by without him. This isn’t love, it’s not even lust. It’s just...what has to be.’

She ignored the memory of feeling his lips on hers and on her neck, his hand gently kneading her breast. She ignored the strange pull, low in her belly, as she remembered his low growls in her ear – the ones that just moments ago had sent a thrill down her spine. She ignored the memory of how he felt in her hand, how his skin felt against her palm as it slid up and down his length. She ignored the confusion as she realized she already missed his arms being around her. She fought it all into a dark corner of her mind and focused on finding sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading - please take a moment and let me know what you think!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Warning: In keeping Merle in character, I was forced to use some pretty racist words in this chapter. I do apologize if this offends anyone – I certainly don't enjoy doing it. I tried to use things that Merle said on the show himself, though one I'm using is actually from BDS 2. Again, I'm sorry, but I want to be accurate to Merle's character, to get the full effect of the Beth's little world right now.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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Beth woke the next morning to an empty tent, though she could hear Daryl's gruff voice just outside; he was having a conversation with Merle.

"I just figured you two needed a night ta get acquainted. She's a sweet little thing...any good in the sack?"

"Shut up, Merle," Daryl mumbled.

Merle laughed brazenly, "You mean ta tell me it's the god damn end o' the world and ya still can't seal the deal?"

"Fuck you, man."

"At's a damn shame, brother. Ya sure ya don't need me to ta talk ya through it?" Beth heard the sound of a punch landing against skin, followed by Merle's laugh again. "That the best you got? No wonder yer so damn cranky this mornin'. Failin' ta perform all over, huh?" Another laugh from Merle, more silence from Daryl. "You best watch it with her, though. I bet she's a screamer. Sweet little thing like that, I bet she's wound up so damn tight...damn. You sure you ain't gonna share? After all I done fer you?"

"All you done?!" Daryl sounded outraged. Beth heard him puff out a breath as Merle crowed in laughter. It was very similar to the reaction she would give her own brother, Shawn, when he was trying to get her riled up. She realized that while Daryl was trying his hardest to stand up to his older brother, he knew when it was best to just let something go and let Merle think he'd won. She wished he'd say something more about not sharing her, just for her own benefit, but was only left with disappointment when their conversation changed topic.

“Spent some time yesterday scopin’ out everyone’s shit around here.” Beth hoped he wasn’t being literal. “Some folks are just damn stupid when it comes ta packin’. Most of ‘em just got clothes and a couple bags a food. Nothin’ really of value, but it ain’t like we can trade shit in anymore. Still, we act soon, we’ll be able ta have ourselves a feast, courtesy of the jackholes in this camp.” Beth was puzzled at that. Daryl and Merle were clearly capable of taking care of themselves, both being hunters – experienced hunters at that – and didn’t have to worry about where their next meal would come from. Were they planning on trading so they had more to eat than just roasted squirrel?

Merle continued, “Gotta wait a while, though. That dick Walsh over there seems ta think the fires in Atlanta oughta be out by now, so a couple people thinkin’ ‘bout goin’ in ta town, see if they can’t get some supplies no one thought ta bring. That blonde bitch is hellbent on goin’, the spic an’ the chink, plus them two niggers. Apparently that’s their A team, save fer Walsh.” Beth cringed at Merle’s language, her stomach actually growing queasy because of it, but stayed quiet, trying to glean all she could from their conversation. “I figure I’ll volunteer, tell ‘em they’ll need someone who knows how to actually shoot to keep the biters off of ‘em since Walsh ain’t leavin’ his little sweetie-pie.”

“The hell am I supposed to do?” Daryl demanded quietly.

“Play nice, baby brother, play nice. See if ya can’t get on everyone’s good side so they don’t see it comin’ when we make off with all their shit. Hell, use blondie ta help if ya gotta. She seems *real* friendly.”

Beth couldn’t help but gasp when she heard their plan. How could people be so terrible as to rob others when they were all facing the same hardships? She had wanted to believe that there was some good in Daryl for him to even offer to take care of her, even if it was for a price, but now, hearing this, she had serious doubt filling her mind. The fact that they were planning on using her to put their hideous plan into action made her feel sick to her stomach.

The brothers stopped their conversation short, apparently having heard her; Beth nearly jumped when the tent flap was pulled open and Daryl stepped in halfway and found her sitting up and awake. “‘Bout time,” he said with feigned ignorance, nodding his head outside, indicating that it was time for Beth to get up and get going. She was more afraid of them now that she knew their intentions for the group than she was when she had agreed to the terms of Daryl’s promise to keep her safe. Now she wondered just how sincere he really was about that after all.

He took her into the woods so she could relieve herself, not giving her nearly as much privacy as she would have liked, but at least he turned his back to her. He muttered something about a walker coming out of nowhere and biting her ass. She made a point to get her business done as quickly as possible after that.

Later that morning, a blonde woman came up to them as they ate and introduced herself as Andrea, offering to take Beth around to meet the rest of the camp since Daryl had neglected to do so. Daryl nodded and followed silently, apparently not trusting anyone in the camp even for a few minutes. She met most people in the group and tried to remember all of their names – not that Daryl was likely to let her converse with them regularly, but she hoped for the small miracle anyway. Everyone seemed friendly enough. She noticed the camp was largely

made up of two types of people: those who were simply waiting for the world to return to normal, for the government and military to come in and wipe out this plague of human monsters, and those who had already given up and were terrified of what their futures held for them.

Daryl was busy talking to Deputy Walsh – Shane, if she remembered correctly – when Andrea hurriedly whispered, “Are you alright? Did he hurt you?”

Beth looked at her, confused. “No. He hasn’t done anything to...”

“Honey,” Andrea started, then dug into her back pocket to produce a compact mirror. Beth took it from her warily and opened it, skeptically looking at her reflection. All she noticed was that her hair now resembled a rat’s nest, her eyes were puffy from crying the night before, not to mention the dark circles which had grown over the past two nights. “It’s bad enough the way Ed treats Carol. If Daryl is hurting you, we can figure something out.”

Beth still didn’t see why Andrea was so upset. Did she think he had given her a black eye? Did she really look that bad? Had she figured out their arrangement and assumed he was forcing her to do things for him? Beth didn’t really want to go into the details with this woman, but she had to say something. There had to be some good in Daryl, though she had to admit it might be difficult to see it. Still, it bothered her that Andrea would jump to such a conclusion – was Daryl really the type of man who would become violent with her if she didn’t do what he wanted.

A voice inside her told her the idea was pretty far from the truth.

She lowered the mirror to close it and hand it back to Andrea when she saw just what had the woman so upset: two noticeable hickeys on either side of her neck. They were huge, an ugly shade of angry purple, and if she looked close, she could almost make out teeth marks.

“Oh my god,” she whispered as she examined them. She had no idea they were there; it wasn’t like Merle or Daryl were all too concerned with their appearance, so she wouldn’t have seen them in any mirror until now. She was humiliated, and at the same time furious. Daryl had let her walk around camp, unknowingly showing off his mark on her.

Beth handed the mirror back to Andrea with shaky fingers. “Thank you,” her voice shook. “He hasn’t hurt me, I promise. It’s...it’s okay.” She tried to sound convincing while pulling the collar of the flannel shirt closed.

Andrea looked at her, clearly not convinced. “If you need anything, *anything*, come find me. We’ll figure something out,” she repeated. Beth nodded, noticing Daryl making his way back to her, ready to escort her back to their tent.

Despite how absolutely livid she was, Beth held her tongue until they were inside, and even then, didn’t let her voice above a loud whisper. “What the *hell* did you do?!”

Daryl frowned and shrugged one shoulder. “Told Walsh I was planning on goin’ huntin’ for somethin’ bigger’n squirrels an’ rabbits in a couple days, asked ‘im to keep an eye on ya,” he replied, stowing his crossbow in the corner of the tent.

“Not *that*,” she hissed, opening the collar of her shirt back up, exposing her marked flesh. “This.” She was beside herself with anger. “You let me walk around the camp, meeting everyone with *these* on my neck?”

His lips curled in a tiny, self-assured grin, “Guess I did.” He stood as straight as he could in the tiny tent. “An’ yeah, I s’pose everyone saw ‘em. Now they know...”

Beth waited a few seconds for him to finish his thought, but prodded for something, anything, when he didn’t continue. “What? What do they know? ‘Cause I’ll tell you what they think. They think you’re forcing me to do god knows what and beating me or...strangling me if I don’t and...who knows what else.” She stopped herself short. Why was she so upset that they would think those things of him? Where was all this coming from? She should be angry at him for leaving those damn hickeys on her neck in the first place, and she was, but she found herself angrier at Andrea that she would automatically assume the worst about Daryl.

‘Maybe it’s because you know that deep down he’s not a bad guy. Yes, you’re in this crazy situation with him, but he’s not necessarily forcing you, and he’s given you a way to make it work for the both of you. He could have just left you for dead back there in the forest. You wouldn’t have noticed him if he hadn’t started talking to you. He’s saving your life, but he’s in it for himself, too.’ The same voice from earlier was resounding from deep inside her and rang through her head.

Daryl met her heated glare with his own, “The fuck do I care what they think? Dumbasses ain’t gonna do shit, anyway, ‘cept bitch an’ moan.” He took a step toward her, and another. Beth never faltered, even when they were sharing the same breath because they were standing so close together. “I put ‘em there so they know yer with me,” he growled out. “I don’t know these assholes from Adam. You may not like me, but you don’t know what any of *them* are capable of, and neither do I. I do know Walsh ain’t wearin’ a ring, but the bitch he’s bangin’ is, an’ that little boy ain’t his, it’s his best friend’s, so do the math on that one. I know that Asian kid is real sneaky, been runnin’ ta the city an’ back, an’ he always comes back without a scratch an’ no one followin’ him. Seems odd for a city boy like him. I know that fucker Ed keeps his woman on a short leash, an’ it *ain’t* for her protection. I know what’s-his-name on the other side of camp is real twitchy, and that Andrea’s got a big mouth on her – hear her talk about how we all gotta work together equally, how she was some hot shit lawyer, fighting for civil rights an’ all that shit. Like any of that shit even matters anymore.”

He cupped her cheeks in his hands; Beth was surprised at how gently he handled her – a vast difference from the anger he was showing just a second ago. He carefully tilted her head to the side, fully exposing his “handiwork,” examining it, letting his fingertips drift over them carefully. His voice was soft and low, “I left these so anyone who sees ‘em knows if they mess with you, they’re gonna be messin’ with me. I can’t keep havin’ ya follow me around all the time, an’ this is the only way I could think to protect you.”

Beth blinked up at him. She hadn’t thought of that. She just assumed it was some Neanderthal behavior, claiming his possessions or something like that, which in a way it was, but it was also much more. “You could just give me a gun or a knife or something,” she muttered.

Daryl scoffed and stepped back, releasing her. “Ain’t givin’ you shit without training ya first.”

“You’ll...you’d train me to fight?” she asked softly. She noticed he wasn’t opposed to her having a weapon.

Daryl rolled his eyes. “Fuck.”

.oOo.

The next several days followed much the same pattern as the first. Daryl would always be awake before her, sometimes even gruffly waking her up if he felt she was sleeping too long. He would provide her with a quick breakfast, usually a few handfuls of berries or a granola bar someone else in the camp had given them in exchange for providing those at the camp with fresh meat the past few days. He’d spend most of his day hunting. Sometimes he brought her along, and she’d try to learn all she could from him, not that he was actively teaching her anything. Still, she attempted to mimic the way he moved through the forest, walking as quietly as she could. She asked once more about a weapon for herself, but her only answer from him was, “Gotta train ya first.” She wondered if and when that would ever happen.

Andrea came around again one morning with her sister, Amy. “I noticed you just have the one outfit, thought maybe you’d like to have something else to wear,” the younger woman said, offering her a small bundle of clothes. Beth took them gratefully, hugging them each in turn with her free arm. It was strange wearing someone else’s underwear, but faced with the choice between that and the same pair she’d been wearing all week...or going commando...she decided she could suck it up and deal.

Daryl had kept true to his word and only asked for Beth’s “services” twice more since he brought her to the camp. She was relieved when he was apparently satisfied with her just using her hand. It did not escape her that each time he let her know, in his own not-so-subtle way, it was time to uphold her end of their arrangement that Merle was nowhere to be found. She wondered if it was an understanding the brothers had, or if Daryl had just timed it out to use their time alone while Merle was out doing God knows what. The nights in between, Daryl began draping an arm around her waist as they fell asleep. “Just in case,” he mumbled against the crown of her head. She guessed it was to make sure Merle didn’t try anything, but the older Dixon had never said or done anything, at least not in her presence.

A week had gone by, and when Beth saw the other half of the tent empty at nightfall, she predicted that Daryl would be asking for her, and judging by the growing intensity of his kisses, considered herself correct. He only ever started kissing her on nights like this, when they were alone with no chance of being interrupted, otherwise he barely touched her, save for a hand at the small of her back when he escorted her into the woods in the mornings, and she suspected that was mainly for show.

That tiny voice from deep within lamented the fact that he didn’t kiss her more often, didn’t hold her afterwards, didn’t even try touching her except in the heat of the moment. Each time her thoughts went down that road, she quickly fought to get them on track again.

Without his asking, she started trailing her hand toward his crotch. She knew she didn't owe him any favors (at least not any more than she was already giving him), but Beth supposed she wanted to show her gratitude for his keeping her safe and fed this past week – not to mention recently starting to show her how to properly handle a knife. She also knew he could demand a lot more than what he was asking, and she was more than grateful that he hadn't changed the stipulations of their agreement as the week went on. Initiating a hand job might just encourage him to keep treating her a little nicer than he had been.

Daryl reached down and wrapped his fingers around her wrist, stopping her in her tracks. "Gettin' a little tired 'a you jerkin' me off," he murmured against her lips.

Beth's eyes snapped open, her body froze against his. Her blood ran cold and she wasn't sure if her heart was still beating. "Daryl..." she managed to get out, but any other words died on the tip of her tongue.

"Sides, I'mma be leavin' for a long hunt tomorrow," he whispered, shifting so he was partially covering her with his torso. "Want somethin' that'll tide me over more'n a couple days."

Beth's breath came in deep, heavy puffs as he began his work reinforcing his marks on either side of her neck. He rolled his body to cover hers, his knee separating her thighs. He kept his weight off her, supporting himself on his elbows, but that didn't stop his pelvis from settling heavily on her thigh; she felt the now familiar length of him resting there between them, could feel the heat of him even through the fabric of his boxers and her shorts. He brought one hand up to knead her breast over her shirt, but then pushed himself off her, still straddling her leg, to start pulling the hem of the blouse over her shirt, exposing her torso, only her bra keeping her from being totally naked from the waist up. He leaned back down to cover her, kissing, licking, nipping her from collar bone to belly button and back. "Wanna show me them titties, girl?" he asked as he sat back on his knees, his eyes drinking her in.

Her gut reaction was to scream, to tell him no, that she didn't want to show him anything, to bend her leg to knee him in the groin and try to escape...but where would she go? After spending a week with these people, she knew someone in the group would most likely take her in, but everyone basically depended on Daryl and Merle for fresh food, not to mention protection, and she was terrified that if she were to fight him and run, Daryl would start bringing less food back.

Or worse.

Maybe he just wanted to look. Maybe he didn't want sex. If she hadn't been so scared, she would have rolled her eyes at the thought. Of course he wanted to have sex. Did she really think she could keep him satisfied just by touching him a couple times a week? Still, maybe she could put it off for a little while longer, and if seeing her topless helped, then she'd let him. They were just boobs, and it wasn't like she had a lot to offer anyway. She pushed herself up onto one elbow and reached behind her, undoing the clasp of her bra then shyly guided the straps off her shoulders until the whole thing slid off and rested on her belly.

Daryl grinned at her, his devilish grin she hadn't quite gotten used to, still torn between being afraid of and attracted to him because of it. He bent over her again, sealing his lips over hers,

his tongue seeking entrance. She felt his hand land on the curve of her waist and inch its way toward her chest. He palmed her breast, squeezing gently, causing her to gasp into his mouth. If he thought anything of her being so small, he didn't show it in any way; in fact, he let a little more of his weight sink down onto her.

His mouth trailed rough kisses down her jaw, her neck, over her collarbones, then wrapped itself around her nipple. She arched under him as her body took over, even though her mind was pleading with her to tell him to stop, that she wasn't ready for this, that she didn't want this. The growing warmth low in her belly indicated otherwise, and her arm moved on its own volition to bring her hand to timidly run her fingers through his hair as he swirled and lapped his tongue against the sensitive peak, only to abandon it in search of its twin.

The sensations coursing through her were completely foreign and confusing. She barely knew this man, and yet he seemed to know how to control her body better than she did. She found herself absolutely panting, more from anticipation than any kind of fear, though the thought of how far this might go had her completely terrified.

All that snapped into sheer panic when his hand drifted back down her waist and began toying with the waistband of her shorts.

"I ain't in the habit of forcin' women," he lifted his head to look up at her, "and I ain't plannin' to start now. But you just keep in mind that I was doin' fine jerkin' myself off before you came along. Gonna need to make it worth my time at least once in a while, girl." He dipped down to suckle her nipple once more, teasing and stretching it in a way that made her shudder in pain, fear...and unexpected lust.

It had come to this: do or die, quite honestly in the literal sense. She hated being forced to choose between her sense of propriety and her sense of self-preservation. She quickly reasoned that she'd been living with Daryl for over a week now, had gotten to know him – at least as much as he was willing to let her – so he wasn't necessarily a stranger anymore. This wasn't any kind of casual sex. This was survival.

Her mind made up, but her heart breaking, she scrunched her eyes shut and slipped her thumbs under the elastic of her shorts and underwear and pushed them down past her hips. Daryl pulled them down the rest of the way, and she choked back a sob when she felt the palms of his hands on her knees, easing them apart, exposing herself to him.

He settled himself in the cradle of her body, still clothed, and began rocking against her. He continued kissing her neck, his thumb found her nipple again and drew tight circles around it. Before long, his hand trailed down her body again and found her, coaxing the seam of her sex open with one finger. He began to tease her opening – never rough, never forced – drawing out the wetness that hid within. He inserted one finger, slowly, all the way to his knuckles. Beth bucked at the unfamiliar pressure, but clenched her jaw, not wanting to make any noise and give anyone nearby a clue as to what was taking place inside their tent.

His groan overshadowed her sharp gasp and the squeak that escaped from her throat when he added a second finger.

Apparently satisfied with how ready she was – physically, at least – he leaned back and pulled his boxers halfway down his thighs, then lined himself up with her entrance. He paused and looked up at her, waiting for...something. Beth realized he was silently asking her permission one last time. At this point, she felt she almost had to go through with it. Wouldn't it just upset him if she were to stop him now? What kind of repercussions would that entail for her? So she just nodded, and let her eyes focus on the seams of the tent above her.

In one swift stroke, Beth Greene was no longer a virgin.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading - please take a moment to review.

I promise the next chapter is almost finished.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of their first time together, from Daryl's point of view.

Chapter Notes

I want to thank everyone for their continued support for this story. I know it's a really different dynamic, one that takes some getting used to, and you have all been fabulous in giving this a chance. I had a couple of you ask if we'd ever get to see Daryl's point of view. In all honesty, I really hadn't planned on it, but once you'd mentioned it, it really made sense to do this chapter following Daryl instead of Beth, so thank you.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

She was tight. *Shit*, she was tight. Tighter than Daryl thought humanly possible. He positioned her legs around his waist so he could angle himself into her better, and focused on not hammering away at her, even though *God* that's all he wanted to do. A pussy like that...a man could get lost in.

She didn't say much, which, in hindsight, should have stuck out to him as strange. The girl talked his ear off most of the time, but *now* she got quiet. He figured she just didn't want anyone to hear her. The most she said was, "Daryl...please..." which only served to stoke his ego. *Girl was begging for more...just might have to oblige.*

He had planned to pull out, cum all over her belly and those perky little tits. Just the thought of covering her like that made him nearly lose control. But *fuck* she was wrapped around his dick like a goddamn glove, hugging every inch of him, he just couldn't help himself. Most girls like her were on the pill or something anyway, right?

It didn't last long. Not that it was embarrassingly short or anything, but it wasn't like he was really trying for anything more than getting his rocks off. Sure, he could have let her just use her hand again – girl did a good enough job at that – but he was particularly horny that night and decided it was as good a night as any to see just how far she'd let him go.

He grabbed a rag to wipe himself off and was about to hand it to her so she could do the same when he noticed the fabric was dark. Not just from being wet. *Dark*. Dark like...blood. There wasn't much, but it was definitely there.

Shit.

“You’re a virgin?” he asked softly. Beth’s answer was to curl on her side and tuck her knees up to her chest into the fetal position. *Oh, shit.* “Why the hell didn’t you say somethin’?”

“Would it have mattered?” she mumbled.

Well didn’t he just feel like a Grade A Jackass? He knew this girl was scared to death, didn’t have a mean bone in her body, and now he’d gone and done this to her. Didn’t even make sure it was good for her. *Dammit.*

He lay down behind her, letting his arm drape around her while supporting himself up on his elbow, deciding to ignore the way she curled into a tighter little ball. “Beth,” he breathed, resting his hand on her hip and stroking the soft skin there. “Shit, girl, I’m...I didn’t...you coulda...”

“Just leave me alone, Daryl,” she whispered. Daryl was pretty sure her voice would have been shaking if there had been any volume to it. He watched as her shoulder began to shake.

God, he felt like an ass. He made the poor girl cry. He didn’t force her or anything. He left it up to her. He might have tipped the scales in his favor a little, but she made the choice. He’d never taken a woman against her will before and, technically, he still hadn’t. At least that’s what he was going to convince himself. Besides, he was going to be gone the next couple days, so hopefully she wouldn’t be so upset with him anymore once he got back. Daryl looked down at Beth and made up his mind to show her just how sorry he was. He pulled on her hip again until she turned to lie on her back. She was making a point not to look at him, which would have been a good thing. Hell, he didn’t want to see the poor thing crying, but he needed her to know...

He sighed heavily, “Look, I know I don’t deserve it, but...”

“But what?” she snapped, though her voice never rose above a sharp whisper; her eyes flashed in anger. “Trust you?” She rolled back onto her side and curled herself into that little ball again.

Well, he certainly deserved that.

All Daryl wanted was for her to just listen to him, hear him out, let him explain. If he’d have known, if she’d have said something...he would have at least gone easier on her. He wasn’t about to tell himself it wouldn’t have happened, but it would have happened differently.

He reached over and cupped her cheek in his hand to gently guide her to turn her head toward him, fighting her meager resistance. In the twilight that surrounded them, aided only by the dying fire near their tent, he could see her eyes, wide with fear, and he stopped short, breath caught in his chest. He’d seen that look before, when his old man had been out on a bender and he’d come home with an awful look in his eye and his mama knew what was coming...though just because she knew it was coming didn’t mean she wanted it. She’d look at his dad like a deer caught in the headlights, and even as a little boy he could recognize the pleading look in her eyes as his old man went to her and dragged her, already crying, into their bedroom.

He hated that look.

And now that same look was staring right back up at him. He thought about just letting her go – it was what she wanted, after all – but something deep down inside him wanted him to make this right for her...as right as he could, anyway.

It dawned on him as he looked down at her, away from that look, that the poor girl hadn't even gotten dressed. Must've been too upset to care. *Way to go, asshole.*

Figuring it would be best to just obey her wish and leave her alone, he pulled his boxers and jeans up, buttoning and zipping the fly. "Here," he murmured, handing over her shirt from where it had landed on the tent floor, "let's at least get you dressed." While she put her top back on, he crawled over to where he had flung her shorts and offered them back to her. She snatched them out of his hand after pulling her hair out of the neckline of her blouse. Once she was clothed once more, she resumed her place curled up and facing the tent wall, arms crossing her chest.

Daryl lay down next to her, facing her back, studying the lines of her slender body. Damn, she was tiny. He was learning quickly that looks could most definitely be deceiving. She might look like a little slip of a thing, but this girl was strong, stronger than she probably even knew. And she was good. And kind. And giving.

Not to mention beautiful.

Daryl shook his head before any more of that Hallmark shit clouded his thoughts. He was suddenly bound and determined to show her he wasn't a complete asshole...but how to do that without forcing her? He tried once more putting his hand on her upper arm. When she but didn't shrug him off right away, he took it as a good sign. Well, a sign. "Beth," he whispered, "I'm so sorry, girl. I prob'ly shoulda known. I shouldn't-a... I'm sorry." He didn't think he'd ever apologized so much at one time in his entire life, especially not to one person, but it was important to him that she believe him.

He'd wonder why some other time.

He couldn't blame her for still giving him the cold shoulder. He figured she had every right to be pissed at him. If she were any other girl, he'd cut his losses and move on, but he was just as trapped in their agreement as she was. He couldn't just kick her to the curb – this girl was depending on him, and he'd be damned before he ever went back on his word.

Daryl decided to keep ignoring the fact that despite knowing he didn't deserve her, he didn't want her to leave. He'd figured out ways to keep her safe, whether he was with her or not. Now he just needed to find a way to make her stay – not because she had to, but maybe even because she wanted to.

Where the hell was all that coming from?

"Here," he stretched his other arm so it rested just above her head on their shared pillow, nudging along the crown of her head with his forearm until she huffed and lifted her head, allowing him to slide his arm under her neck. Daryl let his other arm rest along his side,

figuring she didn't necessarily want him touching her any more than he already was. After a time, his eyes drifted shut and he fell asleep; a tiny part of him wondered who fell asleep first.

When Daryl woke, it was as if everything around him was colored in shades of gray; he figured it was at least an hour or so before sunrise. Somehow, over the course of the night, Beth had turned over and was now curled into him, her head on his shoulder and her arm resting on his chest. Normally in such a situation, he'd get the hell out of there, not caring if he woke the woman in the process or not. Something stopped him this time. A large part of it was remembering how shitty he'd been to her last night...hell, for the past week, but there was something deep in his chest that prevented him from pulling away.

She looked so peaceful laying there next to him, eyelashes brushing against her cheeks, her breath warming his skin through his shirt. A lock of hair had fallen over her face, which he gently tucked behind her ear. Careful though he may have been, the tiny motion was enough to cause her to stir. He all but held his breath, hating that he woke her so early, but when her eyes opened and, after a few blinks, focused on his face, he was overwhelmed with a flood of emotions – the currently ever-present guilt, regret for having woken her, happiness when she didn't back away when she realized where she was, an increasing amount of protectiveness, and a rush of lust at the sight and feel of her. Even though his heart and mind felt terrible about the night before, his dick hadn't forgotten how amazing it felt being inside her.

Their eyes locked on each other for a brief moment before he blurted out in a rough whisper, "God, you're beautiful." And she was. She really was. He'd been with some hags in his day, screwed a couple chicks who looked good under the bar lights but looked like completely different people in the light of the next morning. Not this girl, though – not even with red-rimmed eyes, which he guessed could have been from crying last night. He felt another pang in his chest at the realization.

God, he felt like such a piece of shit. He just *had* to make it up to her.

Unable to hold back anymore, Daryl bent his head to drop a soft kiss on her pouty pink lips. His heart jumped when she didn't pull back right away. Maybe she was still too asleep to think clearly. Maybe she'd forgiven him in her sleep.

Maybe she *wanted* him to kiss her.

Regardless of the reason, he'd take whatever he could get. He brought his hand up to cup her cheek and deepened the kiss, but pulled back before he let himself get carried away, looked back down at her. "I'm sorry, Beth," he murmured. "Last night was...I shouldn't've pushed you like I did. I didn't...hurt you, did I?"

"Yeah, it hurt, but I'm pretty sure it would've no matter..." she trailed off, her voice still froggy with sleep but still soft and sweet like it always was. He heard her unspoken words – "no matter who it had been since it was my first time." Her gentleness cut through him. Christ, was she letting him off the hook for hurting her?

No. Even if she had forgiven him, he had promised himself he would make it good for her somehow. He owed her that at least.

She went to sit up, wincing as she moved, but he stopped her with a gentle hand on her arm. She looked back at him and he tilted his head, silently telling her to lay back down next to him. Once she was settled, yet obviously still wary of him, he asked, “Still sore?”

She nodded, her eyes downcast. He grimaced at that. Each little reminder of what an ass he’d been stabbed through him. He was convinced the only way for him to feel better, and for her to hopefully still trust him, was to do this for her. Now how the hell was he supposed to convince her to let him touch her again?

“Beth, I...” he stammered, his nerve giving out when those blue eyes of hers – so sad and yet still so bright – met his. “I know you prob’ly hate me right now, but I do wanna make it up to you. At least let you get yours since I got mine.” He hoped to hell she knew what he meant. He was really trying to avoid going into a detailed explanation, hoping he could just *show* her.

She never really answered except to stay where she was, lying next to him with her head still resting on his bicep. Maybe she thought this was him calling in her end of their agreement. He needed her to know this one was completely off the books. “If...if you don’t wanna, we don’t hafta. I just thought...maybe...” How the hell was he supposed to ask her?

He sighed and whispered, “Please, girl. Let me take care of you this time.”

He had *never* begged before in his life. Somehow, with this girl, it wasn’t nearly as bad as he thought it would be.

Beth looked up at him, her eyes searching his. When she still hadn’t moved, he ventured to bring his hand up to cover the side of her neck, his forefinger and thumb cradling her jaw. He pressed a soft kiss to her lips before letting his forehead rest against hers. Slowly, very slowly, so as not to frighten her and to give her plenty of time to stop him, his hand drifted down over her torso, not even stopping to play with her breasts, pausing at Beth’s lower abdomen. He turned his hand and slid it to wrap around her side, up to her ribcage and down again, reveling in the dip of her tiny waist before reaching the flare of her hips again. He kissed her again, pulling away again so she had every chance to stop him as he turned his hand so his fingers were pointing to slide under her shorts and panties. The only change was her quickened breathing; he sought her eyes, thankful he didn’t see that frightened look again. Nervous, he could handle, but not fear.

He didn’t want her to be afraid of him, especially not when they were like this.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice rough with...something more than lust. It was like he was really starting to care for this girl.

When the hell did *that* happen?

She nodded, not making any move to get closer or to scoot away. All she did was take a deep breath and close her eyes.

Daryl smirked a little, knowing that even if she was so nervous she was practically shaking, he’d at least piqued her interest. Determined to make this as pleasurable as he could for her,

he began teasing her lower lips, seeking any moisture that hid within. He kissed along her throat again, finding that sweet spot where her neck met her shoulder, where he'd been leaving his mark on her. Her sharp intake of breath when he grazed his teeth over her skin only encouraged him, as did the slight arch to her back when he began to apply suction, pulling her skin deeper into his mouth. Besides, he was about to be gone for at least a couple days – he wanted to make sure these lasted at least that long.

His finger dipped to just outside her entrance. He stopped when he felt her tense, waiting for her to calm down again before continuing. She released a shaky breath and relaxed little by little. When he felt it was safe, he picked up again, lightly stroking her, drawing out any wetness there and guiding it up to her clit, still hidden under its hood.

Not one to linger, he moved back down and slowly pushed his finger into her. God, she was still fucking tight, even just around his finger. He moved his hand back and forth, slowly, almost like he was still teasing her, but was actually trying to just ease her into it. When he felt her juices start to run down his hand, he added another finger, just as slowly as he'd done the first one, and curled them into her, seeking that spot only dumbasses claimed they couldn't find. She gasped, loudly, and he knew she was well on her way.

If Daryl were honest with himself, he'd admit he was well on his way, too. Her tiny little panting noises, the way her hips were starting to buck against his hand ever so slightly spurred him on. Truthfully, he was glad she was actually getting something out of it, rather than her just letting him do what he wanted because she was too afraid to say no.

He moved his finger from her entrance to her clit and back again, over and over, as he watched her face contort in pained pleasure. Her soft hand belied its nature when she grabbed his arm with an iron grip. Her eyes snapped open and she began sucking in a lungful of air and held it, trying her damndest to stay quiet. Daryl fantasized about another time, another place, but only with this girl...somewhere he could lay her down and show her a thing or two.

Somewhere she could let that sweet voice out as she came as loud as she fucking wanted to.

The thought of her stretched out beneath him again was enough to get his hips moving without even realizing he was doing it. Before long, he was grinding his pelvis against her slender body, trying to relieve the pressure building in his dick. As much as he wanted to feel the tight warmth of her pussy again, he knew better than to even bring it up.

Once he got back from hunting, however...

Her fingers tightened their grip, nails digging into his skin, and he figured she was about to go over the edge. He pushed his two fingers into her again, letting his thumb play with her now swollen clit, determined to feel her come around his fingers. Her walls began to flutter, her breath stuttering. A glance down revealed that her nipples had grown so hard that they were about to poke right through her shirt. As much as he wanted to suck on each one of them, something told him to just stay the course, to not change any part of his technique at the moment, to make sure she finally found release.

When it happened, he was almost glad she hadn't reached orgasm when he fucked her the night before. A pussy that tight, squeezing like it was now on his fingers, might have snapped

his dick right off.

She lay there next to him when it was over, panting and swallowing hard to try to catch her breath. When she still hadn't said anything, Daryl asked, "You okay?"

Beth nodded shyly. "I...I never...no one's ever..."

Daryl frowned at that. "Not even yourself?" She shook her head. "Why the hell not?" Beth just shrugged and looked down and off to the side, avoiding any eye contact with him. "Well, glad I could...help."

He carefully pulled his hand from her shorts, "Look, you stay here, I gotta go take a leak." He ducked under the tent flap and made a beeline for the woods. Once he was far enough away, he pulled his cock out of his jeans, not surprised that it was just as hard as it had been last night...and as the blonde beauty he'd been living with came apart literally in his hands moments ago. His fingers and palm were still wet with her slick, so he got right down to business to get himself off, calling to mind her soft panting noises, how she felt in his arms, how god damned beautiful she was. In no time at all he was spurting streams of spunk into a nearby bush. He leaned against a tree as he caught his breath and tucked himself back into his pants, taking care as he pulled the zipper closed. He let his head thump against the trunk of the tree as he lost himself in thought.

What the hell was this girl doing to him?

Within an hour of returning, he was giving Beth a list of warnings and instructions for what to do while he was gone. Merle would be leaving with the group later that day for Atlanta, but his brother had promised to keep an eye (and only an eye) on her before he left. Once both Dixons were gone from the camp, Shane and Andrea were the only two he thought would actually be able to take care of her if she needed anything.

After one last kiss in the privacy of their little tent, Daryl set off to find himself a deer.

For the first hour or so, he just walked, not even trying to track anything. He'd seen antler rubbings on random trees when he'd been out in the woods the week before, so he knew there were deer out there, that he wouldn't have to look real hard to find any tracks. He started getting picky with his shots, not feeling the need to bag every little squirrel he happened across, instead taking only those that looked well-fed.

As the trees around him grew closer and closer together, his hunting senses kicked into gear, his eyes and ears on high alert for anything that moved. Once in a while he saw one of those dead bastards walking around, but only one was close enough to actually give a fuck about. He started to wish for a deer stand, not just to hunt from, but to sleep in once night fell. He began to keep an eye out for trees he could climb easily, like Beth had done.

His mind raced back to the last twelve hours. He was sorry he'd hurt her, but not sorry about anything else. Truth be told, he was already thinking about the next time he'd get to feel her around him. That girl was addictive. Once she entered his thoughts, it was damn near impossible to get her out again. He began imagining all the different things he'd introduce to her, expand her little horizons.

A tiny part of his brain wondered what she was doing at the moment. Were Merle and Shane keeping their promises?

Maybe he'd better start focusing on finding a damn deer, head back to the camp early.

He found a deer trail, probably a day or two old, but it was something. He began tracking, still taking his time, sending a bolt through any squirrel or rabbit that looked like it would give a decent amount of meat. Hours passed before the deer trail crossed through a brook running through the forest. He had to temporarily detour to find a place he could cross without getting his feet wet. Normally he wouldn't have cared, but he'd rather not have to spend the next day and a half walking around with soaking socks.

The trail was becoming fresher – hell, he'd even found the place where the deer had slept the night before, but now the sun was starting to set, and he still needed to find a spot for himself to sleep out of the reach of any of those flesh-eating corpses.

He finally found the deer early the next morning. As he crouched down beneath a bush, lining up his shot – he wanted to hit that perfect spot in its neck that would drop the animal where it stood so he wouldn't have to go chasing after it – it seemed to look right at him with those big eyes, almost fearful.

Almost like Beth's had been last night.

He fought to concentrate, but images of her beneath him ran rampant in his mind. What he had done last night. What he'd like to do to her in the future.

He shook his head, determined to find his focus again, and realigned the shot. Daryl exhaled slowly as he gradually squeezed the trigger, releasing the bolt...

...and watched it sail just off course into the deer's side as it bolted from the small clearing.

Shit.

He took off, knowing there wasn't really any chance of him keeping up with his prey, but hauling ass as best he could after the long night of chasing sleep in the crook of a tree, half-exhausted and half-starving, entirely pissed at himself that he'd let his thoughts get the better of him and result in losing at least a couple days' worth of meat for the camp. At least the bolt had hit center mass – maybe he'd nicked a lung or something and the deer would actually start slowing down soon.

Eventually he had to stop running, the trail becoming too difficult to follow at that speed, not that he was moving all that fast to begin with. He figured he had two options – keep tracking this deer or give up and try to find another one. It took him the better part of a day to find this one, and even though he was prepared to be out in these woods for a couple days, he was tired and ready to call it.

He'd ignore the fact that his thoughts kept returning to Beth for the moment.

His mind made up, he set out to follow the deer, if anything, to get his bolt back. He grumbled when he realized the deer had set a course heading pretty far south, away from the camp, although maybe that would mean he'd find another one along the way. After the first mile or so, the deer had suddenly changed direction, taking a 90-degree turn back toward the camp, and Daryl began to dare to hope. The trees began to thin out, indicating he'd reached an edge of the forest. The trail was easier to follow now, branches of shrubs were bent awkwardly as if something had run past them. He picked up speed again, following the haphazard display of broken branches and dangling leaves rather than focusing on the ground below them.

As he drew closer to the clearing, he swore he heard voices, though he was pretty sure they belonged to people from his camp. At least he wouldn't have to carry the deer's carcass very far. Small miracles.

He crashed through the bramble lining the edge of the woods to find several of them standing around in a semi-circle, all looking at something on the ground. Was he lucky enough that the deer had literally fallen at their feet?

Then he saw the tracks leading up to the group. Those weren't deer tracks.

"Son of a *bitch*! That's *my* deer!"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading - please take a moment to leave a comment!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I am blown away by the amount of support for this story. You guys are amazing! I apologize for the delay in updates. Between teaching, being a mommy, having company come in for the holiday weekend and planning my husband's birthday, then having a boatload of papers to grade, life has been a little busy. Thank you for your continued patience and support. Each and every follow, favorite and review makes my heart dance with joyful giddiness and helps inspire me to write the next chapter, and so, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Beth had spent the morning keeping to herself. Daryl had made sure she had plenty to eat, had shown her what plants to avoid, and had left her with a pistol and a knife, just in case. Merle left with the group shortly after Daryl had left, so she was alone with her thoughts for the most part. She began to wish she knew the members of the camp a little better, especially Amy and Andrea, so she'd have someone to talk to about what had happened the night before...and earlier that morning.

She thought of the many nights spent with Maggie, hiding giggles behind their hands, hearing stories of this boy fumbling in the dark to try to unhook her sister's bra, or that one who thought he had found third base but had "actually fouled out after leaving second." Daryl certainly wasn't as inept as the boys her sister had complained about.

A sad smile crept onto Beth's face, and for the moment, she was glad she was alone in the tent as tears pricked her eyes. She wondered if her family had given up on ever finding her...if they were even still alive.

Beth sniffed and let silent tears fall in the privacy of the tent. Along with her aching heart, she was still sore, physically, and still sad that she'd had to make the choice she had. The kicker was that she knew eventually he would want sex from her, that her hand wouldn't be enough for him for long, she just hadn't expected it so early in their "relationship." More so, she was surprised Daryl showed as much remorse as he had for not realizing the gravity of his actions. She had him pegged as a man who took what he wanted, regardless of the consequences or who he hurt along the way, but the morning after, everything felt so...heartfelt. Even if he hadn't said it repeatedly, she'd have known he was well and truly sorry just by his actions and behavior. If she were honest, she'd probably rather he'd just left her alone, but there was something in his voice, his demeanor, that had her acquiescing to his pleas and let him touch her the way he had earlier that morning.

The actual sex was...good...she supposed, once she got past the initial pain and nervousness. It was clear he was only concerned with himself, using her to find his own release, paying no

mind when she tried asking him to slow his pace with a soft “Daryl, please.” Still, once her body had grown accustomed to the act itself, she was able to focus on other things – the strength in Daryl’s arms around her, his breath ghosting over her skin in time with his thrusts, the feeling of his mouth on her skin. All things considered, it could have been a lot worse. If circumstances had been different, she might have even found pleasure in it.

When Daryl offered to make sure “she got hers” that morning, she had been a little curious to see what it would be like. Her Sunday school teacher had taught her that touching herself was wrong, and it was so deeply ingrained in her that she wouldn’t let her boyfriend, Jimmy, come close, either. That morning when Daryl had worked his fingers in and around her, it still felt wrong...but so very good. To hear Maggie tell it, having an orgasm was the best thing on earth, and while Beth couldn’t wholeheartedly agree, it was...well, it was pretty fantastic. She smiled to herself, remembering the rush of heated electricity that had shot through her as his hand and mouth worked their magic. He’d seemed surprised she’d never had an orgasm before; she was surprised to find it lived up to the hype, and that he could have such an effect on her.

Even though she still barely knew him, there was no denying he was just as good at having sex as he was at kissing, which made him highly skilled in both areas. It wasn’t that Beth was necessarily looking forward to the next time they had sex – though now that they’d crossed that line, she realized there weren’t many reasons she could give him to avoid it in the future – but would she actively avoid it when he asked?

She’d just have to cross that bridge when she got to it.

Beth spent most of that first day in the tent, convinced that the moment she stepped outside, everyone in the camp would know she’d slept with Daryl, and she just wasn’t ready to face anyone just yet. She made sure to ration the food Daryl had left her, sipping at her water bottles periodically so she wouldn’t need to make any mad dashes for the woods to pee. Once during that first day, Amy stopped by, calling through the wall of the tent to see if she was okay, and Beth unzipped the entrance to talk to her for a bit, the whole time trying hard to avoid looking at Amy to see the judgement in her eyes, and not just from her having sex. Beth remembered Daryl’s mouth playing along the sides of her neck and was sure the marks he’d left were just as dark as ever; she also knew Amy, like her sister Andrea, was pretty upset at the bruises left there, so she did her best to keep them at least partially hidden. After a few minutes of conversation, Beth joined Amy for a quick walk, just to stretch her legs a little. She found a bush with the berries Daryl had shown her and used her shirt to hold the ones she collected, offering the younger Harrison sister some to share.

Soon after they’d returned and Beth had eaten a small supper, she heard a car alarm sounding, and drawing nearer every minute. She armed herself with her knife like Daryl had taught her, stowing the pistol in the back of her jeans, and peeked out of the tent to see what was going on. She saw Shane stomping across the camp to a red sports car, popping the hood and yanking the wires to disconnect the battery from the alarm. Glenn crawled out of the driver’s seat and mumbled something to Shane, though Beth couldn’t hear what. Behind the car approached a small delivery truck, and the rest of the crew that had left earlier that morning hopped out of the back. Standing awkwardly near the rear bumper was a man she didn’t recognize.

She also noticed that Merle was nowhere to be seen. A sense of dread washed through her as she realized what that might mean.

The next thing she knew, Lori and Carl were racing toward the new man, who had fallen to his knees. Beth realized this was Lori's husband, Carl's father; a quick glance at Shane confirmed it. She began to tear up, not only in a shared joy at seeing a family reunited, but because of yet another reminder that she had no idea if her family were still alive or if she would ever see them again if they were.

Even though she'd already eaten, Beth joined the group around one of the fires later that evening, buttoning up Daryl's borrowed shirt to hide the hickies he'd left as best she could. The man, Rick Grimes, told about how he'd woken up from a coma in a hospital, not knowing anything that had happened in the days that had passed. The group didn't seem too upset that Merle hadn't returned with them – something about him being out of control and Rick having to handcuff him to the roof of a building – but were more concerned with having to tell Daryl, acting like he was some kind of untrustworthy, reckless, wild animal. Beth almost took offense to that. Yes, he was rough around the edges, and was surly and rude far more often than not, and she'd much rather not be in this arrangement with him if she could help it, but she knew deep down that he was a good man. These people, whom Daryl had barely made contact with and was in fact spending days on end to bring them back fresh food, were now warning Rick that Daryl wouldn't handle the news of his brother very well at all.

Well, of course he wouldn't. What kind of person would hear that their only living kin was stranded, chained up, surrounded by the walking dead, and be completely alright with it? Beth kept her mouth shut and wondered what they said about her when she wasn't with them. They'd been nice enough to her face, but they'd also been at least cordial to Daryl...that is until his back was turned.

That night, Beth slept with her knife tucked under her pillow, just in case. Without either of the Dixon brothers there, she felt more vulnerable than usual.

The next day, late in the morning, she heard Amy scream, then a commotion coming from the far side of the camp. Beth didn't dare go too far from the tent, not that its thin walls would do much to protect her. Moments later, she heard Daryl calling for her and Merle, yelling something about a squirrel stew. She unzipped the flap and stepped out, surprised to see him after only one night when he'd said he'd be gone at least two days.

"Where's Merle?" he asked warily.

Her heart immediately went out to him. He didn't know. Beth could only stammer and shake her head, unsure of how to tell him. "He...he's not here."

"Well, where the hell is he?" He was obviously getting angrier with each passing minute.

"There was a problem in Atlanta," Shane stepped in and explained.

Beth watched as Daryl heard from Shane and Rick what had happened on that last supply run that ended up with them barely escaping with their lives, and in fact without Merle. Daryl

reacted just the way they all predicted, lashing out, throwing his string of squirrels at Rick and pulling his knife from its sheath. Shane grabbed him from behind, putting Daryl in a choke hold.

“Stop it!” Beth cried out, running closer to the scuffle. “Let him go!” she yelled as she pushed on Shane’s shoulder. Her actions had caused just enough of a slip in Shane’s concentration to give Daryl a chance to get out of the hold and up on his feet again. Shane glared daggers at the two of them, and Daryl put himself between Beth and Shane, pushing her behind his back.

The two former policemen continued trying to explain why Rick made the choice he did. The man everyone called T-Dog spoke up, explaining that he had the key, but had dropped it down a drain.

“The hell with all y’all,” Daryl yelled, his voice shaking with emotion. Beth placed a tentative hand on his shoulder, a little surprised that he didn’t immediately shrug her off. “Tell me where he is so I can go get ‘im,” he demanded of the men.

Soon they decided that Rick, Glenn and T-Dog would all go with Daryl to retrieve Merle from the rooftop, much to the chagrin of Shane, Lori and Carl. While the other three men made their preparations, Beth brought Daryl back to their tent. He didn’t ask if she was okay like every other time they’d been apart for any amount of time, though she figured he was still too upset about his brother to be too concerned with her, but she couldn’t blame him in the least.

“Daryl, I...” she started.

“Buncha fuckin’ assholes,” he growled out, pacing what little he could within the confines of the tent.

She sat close to the corner to keep out of his way. “Have you eaten yet today?” she asked softly and was met with his heated glare for an answer. She pulled out the bag of jerky and a bottle of water and stood up to give it to him. “You need to eat something before you go. Last thing anyone needs is a cranky and hungry redneck,” she tried to joke with him, hoping he’d take it as one.

This time his look was less heated glare and more a look of astonishment.

Beth walked up to him and reached out for his hand, placing both items in his palm, feeling his eyes on her the entire time. She looked up at him, mere inches separating them, and gave him a tiny smile. “You should rest a little before you go, too. Can’t imagine you got much sleep last night.” She took a step back toward the sleeping bag, her hand still cupping the back of his until she sat down and their hands naturally fell apart from each other. She invited him to join her with a little pat beside her.

She wasn’t sure where this generosity, this need to nurture, was coming from. Yesterday morning she’d all but hated him, but last night she was ready to speak up in his defense. She’d even caught herself reliving their little tryst in her mind last night before falling asleep. Her emotions were all over the place, and she wasn’t sure how to handle them. At the

moment, she felt sympathy for him – she could definitely relate to not knowing whether their families were alive, dead, or somewhere in between. And to come back nearly emptyhanded after a full day of hunting to have the people he was trying to feed tell him they'd basically left his brother for dead...well, she'd be pretty pissed, too.

She didn't know when she'd forgiven him, but seeing him so upset had her heart going out to him. Sometime in the past twenty-four hours, her heart and mind had both accepted that what had happened...happened. There was no going back and undoing it, and it had guaranteed her safety as long as Daryl was around.

Eventually he joined her on the ground, guzzling the water and chewing the jerky noisily, peeking at her out of the corner of his eye. "You didn't have to do that, you know," he muttered around a mouthful of food. Beth looked at him quizzically, and he explained, "Steppin' in like that wi' me an' Shane. I'd-a handled it."

She fought the urge to roll her eyes and shrugged instead. "It wasn't right, what they did. To either of you," she added. She watched him quietly, playing with a piece of hair that had fallen loose from her ponytail. "So no deer, huh?" she hazarded to ask.

"Damn walker got to it before I could," he mumbled around a mouthful. He paused his chewing and looked over at her, a sudden realization dawning on him. "The hell were you plannin' on eatin'?"

"I think I'll manage. I've been trained as a bona fide squirrel chef, and it looked like you had at least a dozen on that rope you threw at Rick." She breathed out a giggle, "He kinda deserved it, though. How could someone do something like that?"

"Ain't the first time a cop handcuffed Merle for bein'...well, Merle. Just the first time one fuckin' left him for dead," he shrugged. "Hell," he continued, "only Merle can kill Merle, and believe me, he's come close."

After Daryl had eaten and rested a short while, he stood up and started arming himself with the few weapons he had left. Beth had serious doubts whether he was actually in any kind of shape to go on this rescue mission, neither physically nor mentally, but somehow she knew nothing she could say would change his mind from leaving, and she couldn't really blame him for it. If she knew her brother or sister was there in any kind of danger, she'd be chomping at the bit to get to them, too. Still, there was a part of her that was worried for him, not that he couldn't handle himself. It was a little self-serving, she regretted, but if Daryl didn't return, what would happen to her?

He bent to exit the tent when she reached out to grab his hand. She wasn't sure if the rush of electricity that jolted her heart was from his touch or from his crystal blue eyes meeting hers. She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry and her heart in her throat. "Just...be careful," she whispered. Daryl nodded and ducked under the flap, leaving Beth with a mix of confusion and anxiety coursing through her. She pushed the emotions away and followed Daryl outside.

Shane and Rick were having a heated discussion as Glenn and T-Dog waited in the box truck that had brought most of the group back the day prior. Daryl had been pacing in the cargo

part of the truck as the other men spoke. Finally growing impatient, Daryl stepped over Glenn's shoulder to press his foot on the horn, calling for Rick to hurry up.

Beth bit back a smile and returned to her tent.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading - please take a moment and leave a comment!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I've had this in the works for a while, but life just kept happening. There was actually more to this chapter, but it's already getting pretty long (I'm really trying to keep the chapters shorter for this one), but that just means the next chapter already has a head start. Silver linings, right?

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

When the four had taken off, some of the women in camp decided to head down to the reservoir to wash their laundry. Beth joined them, grabbing all the clothes from the tent, regardless of to whom they belonged. Whether Daryl returned with Merle or not, the clean clothes would be a nice change from the usual alternative.

While they worked, Carol's husband, Ed, kept watch, though he seemed to be watching the women bending over and working in the water more than keeping an eye out for danger. The man gave Beth chills, so she avoided eye contact and kept to her task at hand, even when Andrea started to confront him. Beth had just turned her head in time to see Ed push Andrea back and a fight break out, leading to Ed backhanding his wife and Shane coming out of seemingly nowhere to beat his face to a bloody mess. Carol's cries for Shane to stop went unheeded for several blows before Shane hissed a final warning to a barely conscious Ed and stormed off. What little joviality the women had shared moments ago had disappeared, and they hurried to finish rinsing the laundry out and return to the camp.

That night, the group was gathered around a fire again, partly because they were waiting for the rescue party to return, partly because there just wasn't anything else to do. Beth joined them all again, too worried about Daryl to begin trying to find sleep in the tent. She wondered if the four men were spending the night in the city, if they were on their way back, if someone had gotten hurt...or worse.

She tried to focus on the conversations around her to keep from losing herself in her concern.

A shrill scream shattered the quiet that surrounded them. Those who remained around the fire turned toward the source of the sound to find Amy being attacked by a walker who had grabbed her as she exited the RV and tore a chunk out of her arm. Beth saw motion from the corner of her eye and saw walkers starting to swarm around Carol and Ed's tent; the only other person who seemed to notice was Carol, who was crying and holding tight to her daughter.

Everyone sprang into action, either running away from or toward the growing threat coming at them from all sides. Beth wanted to make a break to get to her tent, but her feet were frozen to the spot. She started to reach for the gun she'd kept in the back of her jeans, but didn't trust herself or her aim to be able to shoot the walkers with any kind of accuracy and

not accidentally hit one of the living. That left just her knife, which she was reluctant to use as well; using the knife meant hand to hand combat with an enemy that wouldn't stop until its brain was destroyed, which meant it had to come within arm's reach of her. With a shaking hand, she pulled the small knife from its sheath and held it in trembling fingers, praying to God she wouldn't have to use it, and wouldn't drop it if she did.

Shane and some of the other men were doing more than their share of keeping the monsters at bay, but it still wasn't enough. People all around the camp were screaming in pain and terror as one by one they fell silent, unable to cry out for one horrifying reason or another. Time seemed to speed up and slow down all at once when Beth saw a walker just a little larger than herself turn to look at her...and began to approach.

Her breathing quickened and became shallow in her chest, unable to fill her lungs the way she needed it to. Her mind swam with fear as she desperately tried to remember what little Daryl had taught her. The walker drew closer, snarling and chomping as it did, and she finally twisted the handle of the knife so she would be prepared to stab her undead attacker. She readjusted her fingers around the grip and raised her arm to strike when the exact opposite of what she wanted to happen...happened.

Even amid the clamor of the fight for survival going on around her, Beth swore she could hear her knife hit the rocky ground somewhere behind her.

"No!" she screamed, tears of pure terror welling in her eyes as her hands came up to try to push the walker away. All that happened was her hands sliding on its rotting flesh, barely gaining any purchase in keeping it from biting or scratching her. Her palms were pressed against its chest as its hands came up to grip her upper arms. She began to sob, sure that death was imminent, when a bolt flew from out of nowhere and was suddenly protruding from the walker's temple, stopping its grotesque jaws from snapping mid-bite.

Beth searched frantically for Daryl, knowing he had to be close, but was still unable to move. He, along with the other three men who had gone back into the city, appeared from the tree line, firing bolts and bullets, dropping walkers in their tracks like an apocalyptic cavalry arriving just in time to save the day. Daryl rushed to her, although instead of any sign of relief that she was okay or any gesture to make sure she wasn't injured, he stooped to grab her knife, handed it to her, and shoved her to stand behind him as he continued fighting. She made sure to find a firm grip on her knife and turned back to back with Daryl, keeping an eye out for any more potential threats.

When the last walker had been dealt with, Daryl finally turned to look at Beth, pulling her closer to the fire so he could do a quick examination to ensure she was alright, at least physically. Rick and Shane decided for everyone to go to their tents to try to rest, that the survivors would clean up the carnage once it was daylight. Despite their diminished numbers, there would be extra guards keeping watch that night.

Beth followed Daryl to their tent, where he silently began removing his weapons and lay down on their shared sleeping bag. She knelt next to him, still shaken from the attack, but feeling somewhat better now that Daryl was back. When he didn't ask what had happened while he was gone, she decided to ask what had been on her mind all day. "Was...was he..." she trailed off, unable to give voice to the worst question to ask.

“He was gone,” Daryl mumbled.

“What do you mean...gone?”

“Mean he ain’t there no more,” he spat back. “Idiot cut off his hand to save his ass. Found where he’d went an’ cauterized it and everything. We got back to where we left the truck to find it gone, too. Asshole probably saw us pull up and took off when we were lookin’ for him.”

Beth covered her gasp with her hand. “Daryl, that’s...that’s awful,” she sympathized. She thought of how skilled he was at tracking things and asked, “There wasn’t any way to follow him?”

Daryl scoffed, “Damn near impossible to track somethin’ on pavement. Plus with him driving and us on foot, he was miles away in minutes, I reckon.” Daryl shook his head, “Sides, we had other shit to deal with.” He answered Beth’s questioning look, “Glenn got his ass kidnapped tryin’ ta get Rick’s damn bag o’ guns.” Beth readjusted as she listened with rapt attention. “Turns out these guys actin’ like a bunch-a thugs were tryin’ ta keep a damn ol’ folks home runnin’. Fuckin’ waste-a time.”

She shook her head. “Not a waste of time,” she argued and waited for Daryl to respond. The most he did was look up at her from the corner of his eyes. “You went back for Glenn. You put his safety before your own. You didn’t know what kind of people they were. You could have left him for dead, but you didn’t.”

“Yeah, well,” Daryl mumbled, not finishing his thought before he turned a curious eye to her. “The hell happen here? Where’d those bastards come from?”

Beth could only shrug, “I don’t know. They just...appeared.” She played with a button on her borrowed shirt. They sat quietly, both coming down from their adrenaline rush. Beth was definitely still feeling shaken up from the attack. She could still see the walker’s jaws snapping together, chewing the air mere inches from her face; could still hear the screams, the raspy moans, the gunshots sounding off all around her...the cries of the survivors afterward.

Beth looked over at Daryl to find him looking right back at her, almost expectantly. After a moment, he broke eye contact and began removing his weapons and laying them in their places beside the sleeping bag. Beth realized then that he’d saved her life moments ago and was now waiting for her to show some gratitude and uphold her end of their arrangement. With a sinking feeling in her stomach, she began unbuttoning her shirt.

“The fuck you doin’?”

His question startled her. “I...I thought...” she stammered, her nerves and confusion preventing her from finishing her sentence. She swallowed before trying again. “You...you saved me from that...that thing. I just figured you wanted to...” she blushed, unable to force the words out of her mouth.

Daryl smirked at her. “Too damn tired, girl,” he grunted as he stretched out on his back. “Good to know you’re willin’ to offer, though.”

Beth’s stomach plummeted, a hot flush of shame running through her as she realized that’s exactly what she’d done. On top of that, he’d rejected her. Now she just felt stupid.

“Don’t you worry, sweetheart,” Daryl interrupted her self-deprecating train of thought, “I’ll be takin’ you up on that offer soon enough.”

Beth crawled to her side of the sleeping bag to lie down, facing the tent wall as she usually did. A moment later, before she really had any chance to relax into her position, she felt Daryl curl up behind her, his arm draping around her waist, his thighs against the back of hers. She fought the urge to wriggle away as his pelvis pressed against her bottom. Another moment passed before Daryl offered his arm as a pillow for her like he had a few nights ago; another, and she felt his relaxed but steady breath ghosting around the back of her head.

The same conflicting emotions she’d felt while Daryl was gone crashed through her. She was glad he was back, safe, and felt safer with him next to her than she’d felt those past two nights. At the same time, Beth experienced a feeling of dread at the thought of having to sleep with Daryl again, especially since she was the one to bring up the subject.

And there was the tiny part of her that was almost...*almost*...looking forward to having Daryl take her up on her accidental offer.

She was still trying to sort through her feelings when sleep finally found her.

.oOo.

When Beth woke the next morning, Daryl had already left. She could hear several people already at work in the camp outside the tent. The smell of acrid smoke filled the air around her – the smell of burning flesh. She pulled her hair into its usual ponytail and stepped outside, blinking in the hazy early morning light, seeking Daryl out before joining in to help. There was already a growing pile of bodies in one corner of camp. Beth noticed they were all the human monsters that had attacked the night before; their victims were lined up near the back of a truck. Andrea was kneeling next to her sister’s body, apparently having kept vigil all night. Those who weren’t moving bodies were packing their belongings into different vehicles.

She began packing what few things they had in the tent, assuming they’d be leaving with the rest of the group. She heard Glenn yelling at someone that the bodies of their friends were to be buried, not burned. Others were arguing over where they would be going to seek out safety next.

It didn’t take long for Beth to finish what she was doing, and wasn’t about to attempt tearing the tent down on her own, so she ventured outside again, looking for someone who may need her help. Just as she did, Jacqui, one of the women who had also done laundry the day before, called out to anyone who would listen that one of the men, Jim, had been bit. Several others came over to inspect the wound, Daryl included. Once it had been confirmed that Jim was in fact bit, a fight broke out as to what to do with him. Daryl was apparently not willing to take

any chances, and raised the pick axe he'd been using as if to strike. Rick stopped him, pointing his pistol at the back of Daryl's head and pulling back the hammer, ready to fire.

Beth couldn't stop herself from crying out, "No!"

Daryl turned around and glared first at her then at Rick before lowered his pick axe.

Eventually everything was settled, particularly what to do with Jim and where they were headed next. Jim would ride in the back of Dale's RV, with someone keeping watch over him to make sure he didn't turn as they made their way to the CDC in hopes of a cure. Beth helped load Daryl's truck where she could; she wasn't surprised to learn that Merle had left a motorcycle behind, which Daryl loaded into the bed of his truck. She crawled into the cab, a sudden tension rippling between them as Daryl shifted into gear and followed the line of cars.

Eventually he spoke, his voice laced with anger. "I told ya, ya don't gotta do that shit." She looked at him, confusion pulling her eyebrows and mouth into a frown. "Thinkin' ya gotta stick up fer me like ya did. Like I need some little thing like you comin' to my rescue in my god damn hour of need." He fixed her with a stern look, "Knock that shit off."

Beth could feel the anger boiling up inside her. "I'm sorry, are you mad because I tried to help you? The man had a gun pointed to your head. Forgive me for being concerned."

Daryl just rolled his eyes and scoffed in response. "Fine," he spat back at her, "keep jumpin' in the middle of things. Mark my words, girlie, one of these days, you're gonna get caught in the crosshairs and get yourself in a situation I can't rescue you from."

Beth slouched on the bench seat of the truck, crossing her arms across her chest, feeling every bit the petulant child she was acting like. She watched the miles go slowly by as Daryl followed the convoy through the impromptu parking lot of abandoned cars littered on the highway. Her thoughts drifted to Daryl, as they often did lately. She wasn't sure what to do about that either. Her stomach gave a strange little flip as she began to wonder if they actually cared for each other, and not just out of some sense of duty stemming from their agreement. She couldn't seem to stop worrying about him, whether he was out on a run or standing up to Rick and Shane, and he seemed to get more and more upset anytime she stepped in on his behalf. Something told her it wasn't just some stupid male ego thing, either, regardless of how he made it sound.

Daryl's voice, which had at least faded from anger into more annoyance, cut her thoughts short. "The hell's goin' on?"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading - please take a moment and leave a comment!

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Beth and Daryl, along with the rest of the group, end up at the CDC for the night.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“The hell’s goin’ on?” Daryl grumbled as he pulled the truck to a stop and threw it into park. After several moments, they watched as Glenn made his way from the RV to stop at each car.

“Jim’s not doing so good. He figures it’ll be any time now. Looks like we’re gonna find a spot for him and leave him.”

“What?!” Beth exclaimed. “We can’t just desert him like that!”

Glenn only shrugged, “It’s his idea,” before returning to the RV where members of the group were helping Jim down the steps and to the edge of the trees lining the highway. Each person took their turn saying goodbye to Jim. Beth walked in the morbid procession with Daryl, offering a timid wave as he nodded. They returned to their vehicles and continued following the highway.

The silence between the two of them felt different this time. It was filled with a new kind of tension, not one of anger but a sense of dread and sorrow. The caravan crept slowly along, stopping every so often to move vehicles out of the way when necessary. Beth realized they were making their way back through Atlanta, though coming from a different highway than she’d ever used. In fact, this was a part of the city Beth had never encountered at all, with hardly a storefront or restaurant in sight, at least that she could see.

The RV, and the vehicles following it, pulled up in front of an asymmetrical building. On the grounds surrounding it was a military checkpoint – at least, what was left of it; now the sidewalks and asphalt were littered with half-eaten corpses and blood-splattered sandbags piled on top of each other to create some semblance of a wall. As if the sight alone wasn’t enough to turn her stomach, the reeking stench of death and decay invaded her nose; Beth had to pull the collar of her shirt to cover the lower part of her face to try to keep the smell out and avoid losing what little food she had in her stomach.

She reluctantly followed when Daryl climbed out of the truck, staying close behind him without his having to tell her so. He looked back at her, once, scanning her up and down and nodding when he saw her knife secured to her hip before resuming his place at the rear of the group as they made their way to the building. Large lettering on a sign told her it was the Center for Disease Control and she remembered Rick insisting the group try their chances there – it was their best bet to find a cure for whatever was causing the dead to walk again.

As they approached what appeared to be the front entrance, Beth felt her heart plummet into her stomach as she realized the doors were all covered by metal rolling doors like the ones she would see at storage lockers. A glance at the people around her showed they were all just as disappointed and devastated as she was. Rick and Shane began banging on the door, calling for help she doubted would ever come. Their noise began to attract a few walkers, which Daryl quickly took out with a bolt from his crossbow. Tempers flaring, Daryl started yelling at Rick, Shane was yelling at Daryl, Lori was yelling at Rick, Rick was yelling at the people he believed to be inside. Carl and Sophia began to cry as Beth just watched the scene unfold, numb to her core, somehow calmly accepting that she would die that night.

Daryl grabbed her and pushed her behind him, his back to the building, as he prepared himself to defend the two of them against whatever threats were coming their way. Rick was ranting about having seen a security camera move, desperately pleading that whoever was controlling it would open the door. His words echoed in Beth's ears: "You're killing us!"

A blinding light came from within the building as the rolling door was raised by an unknown savior. She felt Daryl turn slowly behind her in obvious disbelief. Not wasting another minute, the group rushed inside before more walkers could get any closer and follow them inside.

There was one man still living in this giant building complex, who introduced himself as Edwin Jenner. He explained that the rest of the staff was all dead or gone, that it was just him and the computers left. The younger children began asking their mothers about food, which prompted Jenner to volunteer to cook dinner for the lot of them, complete with glasses of wine.

Beth stayed close to Daryl; it wasn't that she didn't trust this man, but she could sense there was something off about the whole situation. Why hadn't he let them in at the first sight of them through his security camera? Why did he feel the need to subject them all to a blood test upon entering the facility? No one else seemed to have these questions – at least, no one brought any of them up – so she focused on eating heartily, trying to remember the last time she'd used a fork and knife to eat.

She'd never had wine before, so she sipped slowly at her drink. Even so, she began to feel the effects of the alcohol: her muscles relaxing, her mind becoming cloudy, her eyelids starting to droop. Beth excused herself to use the restroom, splashing some cool water on her face to wake herself up a little before returning. When she passed Daryl, his hand shot out and grabbed her hip, bringing her to sit on his lap. He had definitely had quite a bit more to drink than she had. It was the most relaxed she'd seen him, laughing and talking more than she'd ever heard before. His hand stayed possessively on her hip, his thumb tracing slow arcs on her skin, as the others told stories of where they'd come from, losing themselves to memories of good times in an effort to escape their grim reality. She found herself giggling at the stories being told around her. It was easy to do, with everyone feeling more relaxed than they had in weeks, laughing with their bellies full for the first time since their world ended. Daryl's hand just rested on her hip, warm and possessive as it tightened each time she readjusted on his lap.

During one of Rick and Shane's cop stories, Daryl leaned in to nuzzle just under her jawline, whispering wickedly, "Thinkin' I'mma take you up on that offer tonight."

Her eyes blinked open in surprise and she turned her head so she could look at him. He was looking right back at her, his customary cocky grin firmly in place. Daryl leaned in again, murmuring, "Lay you down in a bed and show you what it's really supposed to be like," then closed his teeth around the tendon in her neck, just briefly, but long enough to cause a rash of goosebumps to cover her skin and a blush she couldn't blame on the wine to darken her cheeks. "That's it, girlie. I wanna see how red yer face can get."

A chill ran up and down her spine, but she realized it wasn't out of fear, but anticipation. She was suddenly glad she was wearing one of Amy's shirts that day, a size bigger than she normally wore; the fabric bunched up around her torso, concealing her hardening nipples that would have surely been obvious to everyone seated around the table if she'd been wearing her own T-shirt. Daryl seemed to have picked up on her reaction, somehow, and brought his other hand to rest on her knee, inching his palm up her thigh until he was encircling her in his arms, one hand firmly on her ass, the other still tracing those delicious arcs on her skin.

Beth half expected him to carry her off over his shoulder once she'd finished her latest glass of wine (which went down much more quickly than the previous glasses, mostly due to her nerves flaring up and her mouth having dried up unexpectedly), but he waited until the rest of the group unanimously decided they'd stayed up late enough and walked as one down the hallway to their quarters, each of them excitedly talking about sleeping in a soft bed after taking a warm shower.

The moment their door closed behind them, Daryl had spun her around and pressed her up against the wall, his lips crushing hers in his impatience. He didn't pull away as he threaded his fingers through her hair and carefully guided her toward the bed they were to share that night. She went to sit when the backs of her legs hit the mattress, but he held her in place, kissing down her neck as made quick work of divesting her of most of her clothes but kept himself fully clothed. The next thing she knew, he was on his knees in front of her, his hands on her hips, only her underwear and a few inches' space between his mouth and...her.

He placed a gentle kiss just below her belly button, and another...and another...each kiss planted an inch lower than the last, until she felt him kiss her mound. She gasped and gripped Daryl's hair tightly in her fingers. She whispered his name harshly, unable to find her voice in the moment, and released a shaky breath when she heard him chuckle against her. To her relief (and a touch of disappointment), Daryl stood up and walked away toward the head of the bed. She turned to watch as he pulled the blanket and sheet back. He turned back to her and crooked a finger, beckoning her to come to him. She slowly rounded the bed until she stood right in front of him and looked up to see him raising an eyebrow as if to ask her, "...well?"

Beth's heart pounded in her chest. The wine she'd drank was making her braver than she'd ever felt. She placed her hands on his shoulders and pulled herself up to kiss him, then trailed her fingers over his collarbones until they met at the top button of his shirt. Daryl jerked his head back, glowering down at her before gripping her hips and turning her so she was flush up against him and her back was to the bed. One strong arm came up and across her back,

supporting her as he guided them both toward the mattress, immediately attaching his lips to her neck as he climbed over her, a knee on either side of her thighs. He pulled his hand from behind her to rest on her hip as he scraped his teeth along the column of her throat.

Beth knew she shouldn't be enjoying this as much as she was, but it all felt so good to her. Daryl's hands on her were somehow different than the first time they'd done this. Instead of hurried and only serving a means to an end, this time Daryl was teasing and tempting, drawing out tiny gasps and moans from Beth that were beyond her control. She knew her feelings toward him were beginning to change; was it possible he was actually beginning to care for her, too?

As Daryl kissed along her neck and collarbones, dropping down to her breasts to tease her nipples into stiff peaks before returning to land scorching kisses against her mouth, lowering his body onto hers, sinking both of them further into the mattress, Beth took advantage of her sudden bravery and let her hands wander along his shoulders, along the nape of his neck and up into his hair, effectively drawing him closer. A thrill shot through her when he moaned into her mouth as she tugged his hair and arched her back, pressing herself further against him. Spurred on by this, she brought her hands to his chest again to undo another button. Again, he jerked his head back and stared down at her with a stern expression. He opened his mouth, but she pulled him down and kissed him before he had a chance to say anything. She smiled to herself when she realized how easily he could be distracted.

Beth couldn't help but wonder why he was so adamant against her unbuttoning his shirt. Come to think of it, in all the time they'd spent together, she'd never seen him without a shirt...or pants, for that matter. Judging by the way he behaved, Beth didn't peg Daryl as one for being shy. Ever.

Daryl wedged his knee between her thighs, pressing firmly against her center and rocking against her, sending little jolts of electricity through her with each movement. He worked in his other knee, effectively spreading her legs and allowing him to rest in the cradle of her body while still keeping up his gentle rocking motion.

Beth wasn't sure what to do, where her hands should go other than his hair and shoulders; anytime she moved them seemed to irritate Daryl. Somehow, Daryl apparently picked up on this; he pulled her hand away from his neck to trail down his side, his torso, until she was cupping him through his pants. She blushed at his forwardness. It wasn't that she was opposed to having sex with Daryl, especially after he had showed her (and was continuing to demonstrate) just how good it could all feel. She just felt lost in it all, like she wasn't sure she should be enjoying it...or that she should be wanting more of what he was doing to her body. Daryl let out a low groan against her neck when she gently squeezed him, somehow knowing that's what he wanted without him saying it.

His hand left her breast to find its way between them to undo his belt. They both grunted in frustration, her at the lack of warmth on her skin, him because his fingers wouldn't cooperate. Daryl sat back on his knees, looking down at Beth salaciously as he pulled the end of his belt from its clasp and tugged the fly of his jeans open, shoving them down over his hips. Beth caught her bottom lip between her teeth as she looked up at him. When their eyes met, she reached down and unbuttoned her own jeans, earning a wicked grin from Daryl. Handing

over control to her alcohol induced bravery once more before it completely ran out, she slid down the zipper and started to wriggle out of her pants until Daryl took over and tugged them down her legs.

Daryl covered her body with his once again, pressing them together intimately close. Beth could feel his erection insisting entrance to her body, but they were still separated by her panties and his boxers. Her long legs instinctively wrapped around him, copying her arms sliding around his broad shoulders. His hands ghosted over her skin, tangling themselves in her hair, grabbing her breasts and her butt. All the while, they were kissing each other breathless, licking and biting shoulders and necks each time they came up for air.

“Daryl,” she whispered, unsure of what she wanted to say next, even if she could get the words out.

He seemed to be able to read her mind once again and began trailing wandering kisses down her throat, her collarbones, in the valley of her breasts. He continued the line over her navel, which caused Beth to gasp loudly, arching her back and bucking her hips all at once. His warm breath both calmed and teased her as he chuckled against her skin before pressing his lips just above the waistband of her panties. She felt his fingers curl into the elastic and start pulling the garment over her hips, which she lifted to help him strip her bare.

His finger slid into her easily, not with the unfamiliar pressure of the last time they’d done this. “Shit, girl,” Daryl whispered in near reverence, “you’re so damn wet for me.” Beth felt the heat of her blush covering her cheeks and spreading down to her chest, causing her nipples to harden even more than before. Her jaw dropped as he worked a second finger into her and curved it against her inner walls, coaxing her to open for him. He pulled her hand down to meet his between her legs. When she looked up at him, confused, he suggested, “Why don’t ya go ‘head an’ play with yerself a little.”

Beth had never touched herself before. “I...” she stammered, starting to shake her head.

“Do what feels good, sweetheart. I wanna feel ya cum on my fingers.”

She felt her muscles grip his fingers at the mere suggestion. Beth started moving her fingers, trying to remember what Daryl had done that morning after which seemed so long ago now. Before long, her fingers were moving on their own, her body knowing what it needed more than her own mind. A steady warmth began to build low in her belly until it suddenly shattered and her entire body clenched and released simultaneously, shocking her system from head to toe. When she finally felt herself relax, Beth gulped air into her lungs, panting to catch her breath.

She blinked up at Daryl, unable to form any words, and saw him licking the fingers that had just been inside her, closing his eyes as if he were savoring the taste. He wiped the rest off on his boxers before shoving them down his legs and onto the floor then positioning himself, ready to enter her.

Between the wine still in her system and the rush of endorphins coursing through her after her orgasm, Beth couldn’t be bothered to even pretend to put up any kind of resistance to him. Daryl filled her in one swift stroke, stretching the muscles that had just clamped down

around his fingers so deliciously. There was the slightest trace of pain as he seated himself inside her, but it was soon forgotten as he kissed her with a surprising amount of tenderness and slowly moved his hips away from hers. He moved unhurriedly yet deliberately, pulling all the way out before returning to her depths at a maddeningly slow pace. Her legs once again wrapped around him.

“Ya like that, sweetheart?” he asked, continuing his painstaking rhythm. Beth bit her lip again and nodded, her eyes scrunched tight, trying her best to keep any noise from escaping her. “Fuckin’ let me know it, girl.” Beth’s eyes shot open in disbelief. “Usually can’t get ya ta shut up, now ya clam up. Wanna hear you scream, girl.”

The best she could do was let out a tiny squeak, mostly in shock at what he had said. “That’s it, girl,” he grinned down at her, pulling almost all the way out again. This time on the down stroke, he thrust into her roughly, forcing a grunt from deep within her to the surface. “Yeah, like that.”

Beth found that letting it out as he moved within her only made everything better, like he was helping her find release again with every thrust. She stopped holding herself back so much, her body letting her really feel every sensation Daryl was sharing with her. As he increased his tempo, Beth’s cries became louder and more frequent before she silenced herself again, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Nah, girl, come on. Let ‘em hear ya,” Daryl encouraged. “Only reason we can’t get loud outside sure as hell ain’t on account of them. We’re safe in here. C’mon, lemme hear ya’gain.” He rocked back on his knees again, holding onto her thighs for leverage. “Fuck, yes,” he exclaimed as she cried out yet again, unable to stop herself.

That same warmth began to grow as she felt her inner walls begin to quicken around him. “Oh my god, Daryl,” she said breathlessly. He kept pounding away, gaining in speed and intensity with each stroke, even bringing his hand to play against her still sensitive nub to help push her right over the edge. Her breath caught in her throat as a second orgasm took over, finally breaking into a long guttural moan as it crested and washed over her. A moment later, Daryl found his own release inside her, growling through clenched teeth as he pushed into her one last time before panting as he twitched with the final seconds of his own orgasm.

Daryl collapsed on top of her, still firmly embedded within her. “Jesus, girl,” he breathed against her chest, his forehead pressed against her throat. He straightened out, slipping out from between her folds, and landed next to her, pulling her into his arms. She let herself be held without question, definitely welcoming this new feeling of closeness as opposed to feeling used like she had been the past two weeks. “Really should take a damn shower, but I ain’t gonna fuckin’ move until I hafta.”

Another moment passed. Beth had already begun to feel the first pull of sleep coming over her when Daryl asked, “Was it...better?”

Beth turned to look him in the eye. He seemed so unlike himself, lacking his usual confidence and bravado. Beth just nodded, “Yes. It was definitely better.”

“Good,” he grinned, obviously pleased with himself, then kissed her forehead and relaxed into the pillow beneath him. He reached behind him and pulled the sheet and blanket over the both of them before wrapping his arm around her again, keeping her firmly at his side.

Beth couldn't find any reason to refuse or complain as she slipped into the first peaceful sleep she'd had since the world had ended.

Chapter End Notes

I am continuously blown away by the support I've gotten for this story. I'm trying my best to get updates out for you all, but real life has been keeping me plenty busy lately and doesn't really show any signs of slowing down. I'm not giving up, I promise.

I'd like to thank you all for the wonderful comments and all the kudos and follows and what-have-you. My heart does a fun little skip every time I get an update. On top of that, this story was nominated for the Bethyl Moonshine Awards on tumblr (see [ultimatebethylficlist](#) for details). I am beyond surprised to have been nominated – thank you Thank You THANK YOU!!

Thank you for reading – please take a moment to leave a review!

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I'd like to thank everyone for their continued patience. I know this chapter was a long time coming. I've been trying to write a little bit everyday, but sometimes life insists otherwise. Anyway, thanks again, and I hope it's worth the wait.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Daryl woke from what was probably the best sleep he'd had in weeks...months...hell, maybe even years. His head was still a little achy and groggy thanks to the wine he'd consumed the night before, but he felt well-rested despite the threatening headache. He just hoped Dr. what's-his-name had some Tylenol or something to help him out.

He methodically began to stretch his muscles, letting the mattress cradle him just a little longer. He frowned and looked to either side of him, realizing only now that Beth was no longer in bed with him. Had she finally left him now that they were relatively safe? This place had food, electricity, running water. For all he knew, there were spare clothes stored somewhere that she was trying on right now. A moment's pause as he fought the sneaking feeling of disappointment from sinking too deep into his chest (seriously, what the hell was going on with him lately), he got his answer: on the other side of the bedroom wall, he heard the steady stream of the shower running. There was something more, though...something soft and sweet and damn near haunting.

Beth was singing.

Daryl wouldn't ever consider himself a connoisseur of good music, but he knew what he liked, and damn if her voice wasn't doing something to him...something not entirely unpleasant. If he were to let himself get sentimental and all that shit, he'd say it was working its way in and around him, filling and soothing him with its sad but sweet melody. It stirred something deep in his chest, something he couldn't quite identify. All he knew was that he was pretty sure he could listen to her singing all damn day...not that he'd ever let her know that.

He had the strong, sudden urge to hear her voice in a completely different capacity – memories of her crying out in pleasure as he fucked her the night before had him stirring in a much more familiar way. All he wanted to do in that moment was chase that voice out of her again, hear it panting his name in his ear over and over.

His mind made up, Daryl threw the blankets off himself and stood up in one fluid motion...

...and abruptly collapsed back onto the bed. The combination of a hangover headache, sudden motion, and what felt like most of his blood rushing to his dick caused him to reel backwards,

leaving him with very little sense of balance at all.

He hung his head and focused on breathing, keeping the sudden wave of nausea at bay, not to mention trying to gain some sense of equilibrium. All (well, most) thoughts of steamy shower sex with his blonde songbird vanished. That's all he needed – be in the middle of the act and get a sudden case of the spins. He could see it all in his head: her long legs wrapped around him as he pressed her up against the tiled wall and then his own legs give out from under him, sending them both to the floor, at least one of them getting knocked unconscious.

Nope. He'd just have to calm himself down and wait for his next chance to be with her.

And damn he hoped it would be soon.

.oOo.

He's not sure exactly how it happened. One minute they were eating breakfast with the group, the next, Jenner was telling them that the building's generators were nearly out of fuel, which meant that the main systems were shutting down, including the computers that controlled all the viruses and whatever else they had in the labs. The only outcome was to blow the whole damn complex to kingdom come...from the inside...with all of them trapped inside. And it would all go down in a matter of minutes.

It was unacceptable. More than that, it was fucking bullshit.

Daryl felt helpless. One look at Beth, with her eyes wide and bottom lip quivering, had him burning with rage that this was the only option. He refused to believe it. He grabbed an axe one of the group had brought in the night before and started going to town on the metal doors separating them from the corridor that would lead them outside. Blow after blow, he was hardly making a dent. His next instinct was to crack the damn doctor's head open; surely one of the group could figure out what button would open the doors even without his help. He felt arms wrap around him, holding him back, until he finally gave in and returned to the doors, trying like hell to block out the quiet sobs of those behind him.

Finally, someone talked Jenner into giving them the chance to survive. The doors in front of him slid open. Daryl rushed back and grabbed Beth by the wrist and all but dragged her behind him into the hallway, racing to their room to grab what little they had before making their way to the lobby. He was vaguely aware of the rest of the group behind them, all frantically trying any and all exits, resorting to attacking the thick windows lining the walls.

While others fired shotgun blasts and even tried breaking through the glass with an aluminum chair, Daryl kept Beth close and kept hacking away at the same spot near the framework with the axe. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Carol digging through a duffel bag and hand something to Rick. Rick began yelling for everyone to get back; Daryl looked up curiously before making any kind of move. When he realized Carol had given him a damn grenade (wherever the hell it had come from), he grabbed Beth and hauled her as far back into the building as he could and threw himself on top of her, feeling her tremble beneath him as they both awaited the blast.

They didn't have time to wait for the dust to clear; as soon as they saw the window panel had been blown away, everyone made a break for it, knowing they had only seconds to get as far from the CDC building as they could. Daryl was grateful for Beth's long legs being able to vault over the piles of sandbags in their way as they rushed to the line of vehicles out on the street. They both slammed into the truck together before Daryl could find the handle and wrench open the door. He all but threw Beth across the worn and faded seat before covering her once again.

At first he wasn't sure the blast would ever come...until it did. The truck rocked back and forth from the force of the explosion as a wave of near-blistering heat surrounded them.

And then it was over. He couldn't hear much over the ringing in his ears, having been near the blast radius of two explosions within minutes of each other, but he felt Beth move next to him as he sat up to survey the damage. The blast radius reached just shy of the sidewalk; the building was basically obliterated, nothing left but smoking piles of molten steel and smoldering concrete. Daryl turned back to Beth, cupping her cheek with his hand. "You okay?" he asked, not sure if she could hear him or not. She nodded against his palm, gulping in lungful after lungful of air. He nodded, then pulled her close to him, setting her on his lap before shifting her to the other side of the cab so he could slide under the steering wheel. He breathed a sigh of relief when he turned the key in the ignition and the engine roared to life. Within minutes, their mix-matched caravan was in motion once again, following the road out of Atlanta.

.oOo.

Daryl ended up having to abandon the truck and consolidate everything they had into the side compartments of Merle's bike. If Beth was nervous about riding on the back of the bike, she didn't show it. Much. Part of him knew she was holding onto him tightly, for dear life, out of fear of falling off. The other part foolishly hoped she was holding him tight because she wanted to.

Hours later, he noticed Beth sitting more upright than she had for the duration of the drive so far, her hands fidgeting against his stomach. He slowed down to look over his shoulder at her and saw she was grinning ear to ear, practically glowing with excitement. "The hell's a'matter with you?"

"I know where we are," she said, all but bouncing in her seat. "This is the highway I was supposed to be on. It runs right by my daddy's farm."

Daryl's eyebrows shot up. He hadn't expected that at all. He knew the group was quickly running out of options for places to stay. Truth be told, they were out of options, running on fumes, hoping for a miracle. "Well, hell, girl. Think he'd mind a couple visitors?"

She didn't get a chance to answer before Daryl had to slam on the brakes to avoid hitting the car in front of him. He craned his neck around to see what caused the sudden stop and saw a cloud of steam seeping from the front of Dale's RV. As more and more of their group left their vehicles, Beth and Daryl followed suit. He knew Dale had been limping the RV along for a while. The sun was on its way back toward the horizon, though they still had a couple good hours of sunlight left to see what they could find in the cars around them.

Daryl had made sure Beth was right next to him as they scavenged through the cars, grabbing what they could. It seemed Beth had realized just because they were near her daddy's farm didn't mean her daddy, or any of her family, was still there, and they needed to be prepared for that. Things were going fine until it got quiet.

Then a little too quiet.

And then, that same foreboding quiet was slowly replaced by the unmistakable growls of walkers...and it wasn't just a couple. It was a whole damn herd; had to have been at least fifty of the damn things coming right toward them.

"Shit."

He grabbed Beth's hand and all but dragged her after him, causing her to drop everything she'd found, but he just couldn't bring himself to care right now. Together they made their way down the road, going the same direction as the walkers, trying to avoid being seen while looking for a place to hide. As they passed a delivery truck, he heard someone panting, damn near hyperventilating. T-dog was bleeding, badly, down his forearm and a walker was closing in on him, cornering him against the tire of a car.

Daryl quietly handed his crossbow to Beth and silently slid his knife into the back of the walker's head. He muttered over his shoulder, "Get in the car," before pulling T-dog to lie flat on the ground and covering the man with the recently killed walker. When he turned around, Beth was still standing, dumbfounded, crossbow held loosely in her hands, staring at the scene with her mouth hanging open. "Get in the damn car, Beth," he growled out, grabbing her upper arm and pulling her toward the sedan, yanking the bow out of her hands while unceremoniously shoving her in the back seat before closing the door as quietly as he could, given how pissed he was. "Don't fuckin' move," he all but barked at her before grabbing the corpse out of the front seat and pulling it on top of himself, hiding from the oncoming horde.

Within seconds, he heard the raspy groans and scuffling feet filtering past him, hoping to high heaven that Beth had actually listened to him and stayed right where he put her. Once the last of the walkers had passed, he waited another minute or so to make sure the coast was absolutely clear before shoving the body off himself, opening the car door for Beth, and silently enlisting her help in carrying T-dog to the rest of the group.

When they had all reconvened, he noticed Rick was missing. Apparently, Carol's little girl had gotten scared and ran off and Rick went to find her. Close to an hour later, Rick came back, surprised the girl hadn't returned yet. Both he and Carol looked at Daryl expectantly, like he was supposed to just jump at the chance to go on a wild goose chase. He was about to tell them all to fuck right off until Beth laid a soft hand on his upper arm and looked up at him with those big blue eyes. "I ain't leavin' you behind," he whispered. "These idiots can't even take care of their own, how the hell are they gonna look after you, too?"

"Then I'll go with you. I know parts of these woods. We're not all that far from my dad's farm," she argued, and Daryl was hard pressed to find any fault in her logic.

"You got that knife on ya still?" She nodded in response, placing her hand on the handle. "Fine," he said gruffly and lumbered over the highway guardrail.

It ended up that the girl, Sophia, had run the opposite way of the farm, so Beth wasn't all that much help after all. Still, he felt better with her there with him rather than back with the crew suffering from a case of permanent-head-up-their-ass. After an hour or so with no trail to follow, the sun had sunk low enough that Daryl wouldn't be able to really look for the girl without a flashlight. They turned back, Rick reluctantly so, and crawled back over the guardrail with just barely enough light to see the rest of the group crowded around him. He shrugged his crossbow more securely over his shoulder and let Rick deal with the questions. He had more important things to worry about, like where the hell he and Beth were going to sleep that night.

Luckily, or so he thought, Dale had offered up his RV to them. The problem was, he had offered it to others as well, including Carol, so all night, Daryl could hear her sobbing and sniffing. Daryl was sitting at the table with his legs propped up on the opposite bench, Beth cuddled up against him, her head against his chest. He couldn't find a good spot for his head to rest against that wouldn't end up with a stiff neck in the morning, and, not for the first time, he regretted leaving the truck behind. *Live and learn*, he thought.

"Daryl?" Beth's whisper pulled him from his thoughts. "I need to get out of here. It's too stuffy and..." she trailed off, but he felt her turn her head to face the bedroom area in the back where Carol's sobbing hadn't let up at all.

"Yeah. Let's go."

They walked down the highway, staying in the shadows and out of sight of any walkers that may be lingering nearby. Fortunately, any walker worth worrying about had followed the horde that had come through earlier in the day, leaving the woods that lined the road relatively safe, at least for the time being. They'd travelled a mile, more or less, when Beth slowed to a stop. Daryl had taken two steps before realizing she was now behind him and turned to find out what the hell she was doing.

"If we go around that bend, down another couple miles, you'll see my mailbox."

Daryl blinked at her, her words not quite computing in his sleep deprived brain. "Say what?"

Beth stared off into the distance for a moment before shaking herself from her thoughts and looking at him, meeting his angry stare. "I...I told you we were close," she offered weakly.

He readjusted his crossbow on his shoulder and stepped toward her, toward the rest of the group behind her. "The fuck we standin' here for? Let's go get the bike an' head..."

"I can't, Daryl."

He frowned at that, taking another step toward her. "Why the fuck not?"

She hung her head and twisted her fingers in knots. "I...I don't know..." She drew in a deep breath and forced her hands to her sides, steeling herself to look up at him again. "What if they're all gone? If they left? If they're all dead? If they're walking around like those...things? I couldn't stand watching someone put them down. I'd be alone. No family left. I just...I can't."

Daryl didn't miss the way her voice started shaking as her eyes shone with tears. He huffed noisily, "An' what if they're all still there, just sittin' pretty? We're out in the middle of fuckin' nowhere. What if you're sittin' here, holdin' out, scared fer nothin'?"

"And if they are alive?" she answered back hotly. "I show up out of the blue and they ask how I survived and they found out what I...what we..." She sniffed loudly and angrily wiped away a tear. "If Daddy found out that I let you..." she hung her head again, "he wouldn't let me stay anyway."

A plume of rage shot through him like wildfire. So, what, he was good enough to keep her ass safe but not good enough for anything else? What the hell was he thinkin', anyway? That she'd wanna stay with him? Some greasy old redneck damn near twice her age? Still, who the hell did she think she was, makin' him feel like he wasn't good enough? Sure as hell was good enough for her last night.

"My daddy's real religious," she continued, pulling Daryl from his angry thoughts. "He about kicked Maggie out when he found out she was foolin' around with boys. I...I agreed with him. I was mad at her. How could she act so..." Beth hugged herself and looked around before she continued. "Then I found her birth control pills. It just proved what she was doin'. I just...I couldn't believe it. I grabbed that whole packet and ran down to the duck pond and threw them right in. God," she laughed quietly, "we were screamin' and yellin' and Daddy came runnin' out and then I saw the look in Maggie's eyes." Beth turned to look at Daryl, "I knew if I told him what I'd found, she'd be gone for good. She was on her last chance with him...and I couldn't have that. So I told him we were just playin', put on my biggest smile, mud drippin' all over the both of us." She looked away again, wiping a tear off her cheek. "If he puts it together that I had sex with someone I hardly knew, he wouldn't care about the why."

Daryl was quiet for a moment. "So what?" Beth looked up at him, startled at his bluntness. "If they're already gone, whether they're dead or just gone, are ya any worse off than ya are now? An' if yer dad finds out and actually kicks you out, we just continue our little arrangement. Ya got nothin' ta lose."

He watched as Beth took a slow breath in and held it before puffing it out. "You're right. For all I know, I've already lost them. Guess I don't have any reason to be afraid." She steeled herself and turned to face him again. "Tomorrow. I'll show you how to get to the house. Either way, it'll be safer there than out here on the road."

With that they returned to the RV. Daryl noticed a slight bounce in Beth's step that he hadn't noticed before. He held back, letting her lead the way back, refusing to admit to himself that he hoped she was right about her dad, that their little deal would carry on. The girl was damn near addictive, and he wasn't ready to kick this particular habit yet.

The group was slow moving the next morning, as per usual, much to Daryl's chagrin. To top it all off, Rick decided he wanted to go looking for Sophia again, and took Carl and Shane with him. They'd been gone just under an hour when they heard a single gunshot. Daryl fought to keep from rolling his eyes when Lori started pitching a fit about something being wrong, mainly because he knew they were looking to him to fix it. He begrudgingly led

anyone not working on the RV along the trail the other three had left, but stopped short when a short haired brunette on horseback pulled up in front of them.

“Maggie?!” Beth whispered, her eyes all but bugging out in disbelief.

The brunette didn’t seem to hear her, instead asking for Lori Grimes, rattling off some story about Carl getting shot by someone from her farm. Without blinking an eye, Lori mounted the horse, sitting behind Maggie. It was only then that the brunette laid eyes on her sister. “Beth?” She looked back in the direction of the farm. “Can you find the farm from here?” Beth only nodded. “I’ll see you there.”

Anger shot through Daryl like electricity. This girl’s been missing for close to a month and her own damn sister hardly even said two words to her. Circumstances be damned, that was downright shitty. He wasn’t even sure Merle would have pulled something like that. He looked over at Beth again, and saw her trying like hell to hold herself together.

She looked up at Daryl with sad eyes and a watery voice to match, “We better get going.”

By the time they’d returned to the highway, got the RV up and running again, and cleared enough cars from the road for their vehicles to get through easily, there was barely enough light to see. Not that Daryl had asked, but the majority of the group stated they’d rather stay where they were one more night rather than travel in the dark. That same anger from earlier spiked at that. Like Beth wouldn’t know how to get to her own house, regardless of what time of day or night it was.

Beth, he noticed, just took it all in stride. Damn girl was tough; he wondered if she’d ever get a chance to prove it to anyone but him. He was ready to say ‘Screw ‘em all,’ and head out just the two of them to get her home, especially now that she knew her family was alive and well. Beth didn’t seem any more anxious to get moving than she had last night, so he didn’t push matters any further. Instead they climbed into the back of the truck the Grimes had been driving, using the opportunity to stretch out rather than try to grab a few winks of sleep in the cramped RV again.

A thought flitted through his mind: this could be his last chance to be with her, to feel that tight pussy around his dick, to feel her breath against his neck as he pumped into her. Based on the way Beth was cuddling into his chest like a damn kitten looking for a warm spot to sleep, he figured she was having close to the same thoughts. The kicker was, with them being in a vehicle by themselves, yes they had privacy, but they were ultimately exposed to anyone who walked by, living or dead. They’d have to be damn careful and quiet to avoid any unwanted attention.

Daryl let his arms wrap themselves around her. “Could be our last chance,” he murmured against the top of her head. “Ya wanna?” For a moment, he thought maybe she’d fallen asleep. Maybe she was too afraid to tell him she didn’t want to.

But then he felt her snuggle in even closer, something he didn’t think was possible, and tilt her head back. Her lips brushed against his jawline, “Okay,” she whispered.

“Gotta stay damn quiet,” he told her as much as reminded himself as he angled himself to face her fully. It about killed him to say it. Other than an ice cold beer, all he wanted in this world was to hear her sweet voice crying out, knowing he was the one that caused her to do it.

He wasn't sure who kissed who first, but before long, they were making out like a couple of teenagers. He almost pulled away when he realized that was exactly what she was, but he just couldn't bring himself to. It was just so easy to take her in his arms, to wrap himself around her. He'd never really wanted to be all that close to anyone, let alone some chick, and yet here he was, seemingly unable to get enough of this girl.

If he were honest, the selfish side of him, which made up most of him, hoped she was right and her dad would kick her out just so he could keep her with him. And it wasn't just the sex, though that made up a big part of it. Being with Beth, making her feel good, feel safe, feel like maybe someone gave a damn about her, made him feel good.

When the hell did he start giving a damn about anyone, let alone some chick?

Beth ain't just some chick.

Where the hell does this crap keep coming from?

How the hell did my shirt come open?

Daryl pulled away from Beth suddenly and glared at her only to see her looking up at him innocently. Sometime while he was lost in his thoughts, she had worked her way into his lap and was now straddling him. Even in the waning moonlight, he could see her pupils blown, drinking in what little light they could find. Her fingers were dancing nervously on the last button holding his shirt closed; her bottom lip hid behind her top teeth as her thumb pushed the button through its hole.

He wanted to yell. He wanted to shove her off him and storm off.

He wanted to feel those soft, delicate hands on his skin.

Daryl watched in silence as Beth slowly lifted her shirt up over her head, baring her perky little titties to him. Just as he had the thought to cup them in his hands, her fingers trailed up his arms to play along his collarbones then drift down his torso. His abdominal muscles moved on their own accord, reacting to being unintentionally tickled. Before he had the chance to say anything, she leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips, pressing herself into his chest.

His hands came up to cover her back, all but crushing her to him. He didn't know what was going on and he couldn't find it in himself to care anymore. This tiny little thing of a girl was the strongest damn addiction he'd ever had, and he had to get his last fix in before she left him. His pants were growing painfully tight, his dick straining against the zipper. He gasped in a breath when Beth moved her hips just so against him, giving him the sweetest and yet most aching pressure where he needed it most.

“Get them shorts off,” he grunted against her lips, trying like hell to pull himself away again. He moved her as gracefully as he could, given his mental state at the moment, and started hurriedly wrestling his belt out of its buckle and shoving his fly down, giving him momentary relief before he pushed his pants and boxers halfway down his thighs, struggling not to make too much commotion so as not to make the shocks on the truck squeak. He turned to see if Beth was ready and damn near came just at the sight of her, sitting there so innocently, not all spread out like in nudie mags or porno flicks. Her shorts sat next to her as she looked back at him, her eyes repeatedly glancing down at his crotch. He wondered just how much she could see of him. “Get on over here, girl,” he motioned with a jerk of his head.

“But I...I thought...” she stammered out.

Daryl pulled her back into his lap, stopping her short, though he figured what she was about to ask anyway. “You weigh less,” he explained. “truck won’t make as much noise this way.”

“But, I’ve never...I don’t know what to do,” she said softly, but still slowly crawled back to him to take back her place in his lap.

He remembered back to just a few moments ago, how she moved against him without any help from him. “Think yer gonna be just fine.” Daryl reached between their bodies to line himself up with her entrance and slowly dragged his other hand up her thigh to rest just above her hip. He guided her slowly down his length. “It’s all you, girl,” he tried to encourage her and worked to focus on holding still, as much to keep quiet as to not scare her.

Seconds passed before she started moving on her own. Beth repositioned herself, spreading her legs so she could sink all the way down until their hips met. “Oh my god, Daryl,” she whispered and let her forehead drop to his shoulder. He could definitely agree with the sentiment. Feeling her around him was like sliding into heaven, and when she started arching her back and slowly curving into him, he’d thought he’d died and gone there, never mind that he didn’t deserve anything this good, this too-perfect girl. End of the world be damned, he was in fucking paradise.

Beth started riding him, always slow and careful, keeping her movements smooth. Her nipples rubbed teasingly along his chest, little sighs and moans escaped from her perfect mouth as she did. Her lips formed a perfect “O” as she found her rhythm. He couldn’t stand it anymore; Daryl leaned forward and kissed her, swallowing any sounds she made before they grew too loud. Their tongues danced together as they hummed their pleasure to each other. She pulled away, gasping for breath as her legs began to shake on either side of him. “Daryl...oh god...” she panted, her hips now moving erratically.

Suddenly she leaned back, her back arching beautifully backwards, her hands on his knees to support herself. He marveled at how perfect she looked as she found her release, still bucking against him, her nipples pointing to the roof of the truck. He knew better than to move in this most crucial moment, but also knew he had to as her face contorted in the pleased pain of her orgasm. Her moans were growing louder every second; any more and she would have alerted every walker in the area exactly where they were. Daryl moved to support her with one arm and clapped his palm over her mouth just before she groaned out her release.

He grit his teeth and growled as Beth curled back into him, her inner walls milking his own orgasm from him as her arms wrapped around his shoulders. They clung to each other as they came down from their respective highs. Daryl leaned back, holding her to him, allowing them both to relax and catch their breath. As the tension in his muscles faded and sleep began to overtake his senses, two thoughts plagued Daryl's mind:

Why did that feel like goodbye?

Why was it bothering him so much if it was?

.oOo.

The next day, bright and early, Daryl refused to take anyone's complaints or excuses for waiting on the highway one more minute. He rushed everyone through a meager breakfast and all but shoved them into their vehicles to get this show on the road.

When they pulled up to the house, Maggie was already pacing on the porch, trying to see through the windows of each vehicle, apparently searching for her sister. *Some time to finally start giving a damn*, Daryl scowled to himself. Here they were on his bike, out in the open, and her sister couldn't even see her.

Beth's soft lips against his cheek pulled him from his thoughts. His eyes snapped over to meet hers, and were met with a sad smile. "Thank you, Daryl," was all she said before taking her bag from his side compartment and jogging up to meet her sister.

Daryl couldn't understand why he was so angry and upset. He had one less responsibility now. Yeah, he'd lost his piece of tail, but there were lots of women who'd either left him or he'd snuck out on. Why the hell was Beth's leaving affecting him so differently?

He still hadn't figured it out while the group set up camp on the far side of the lawn.

He still hadn't figured it out as he continued the search for Sophia. (It wasn't like he had shit else to do.)

He still hadn't figured it out while he recuperated from landing on his own damn arrow when he fell down the damn hill when Beth's damn horse had bucked him off when a damn snake had spooked it. In fact, now he had more to ponder: why did his heart start racing when Beth would come to bring him a meal or when he heard her voice, her laugh, drift in from the next room? Even more confusing was why he was so disappointed when he didn't see or hear her all day.

The only thing that seemed to push Beth from his mind was when Glenn announced there were walkers in the barn and Shane ended up going ape shit. Daryl took the shotgun the deputy practically shoved in his hands and followed to the barn. Shane broke the lock and chain keeping the barn doors closed and a dozen or so walkers came stumbling into the yard.

Daryl, Shane and anyone else armed with a gun opened fire on the walking corpses. He gave a moment's pause when, somehow, over the volley of gunfire, he heard Beth sobbing behind him. He turned back to see her clinging tightly to her sister.

Everyone froze when the last walker made her way out of the barn – Sophia.

They watched in near silence – the only sounds filtering through the air were the girl’s soft growls and her mother’s cries – as Rick took care of her at point blank range.

The Greene girls walked around the bodies, apparently recognizing quite a few as friends and neighbors. Beth stepped carefully around them, stopping to kneel next to what looked like an older woman. She reached down and brushed the hair out of the woman’s face.

Then all hell broke loose.

A spike of fear pierced Daryl’s heart, paralyzing him as the older woman reached up and lunged for Beth, jaws full of rotting teeth snapping in her face. Maggie, Rick, and several others rushed to pull the two apart, but the woman’s body must have been too fresh as she held on relentlessly. The commotion stopped suddenly. When the dust settled and everyone backed up to give her space, Daryl saw Beth pull the knife he had given her out of the walker’s skull...then heard her openly sobbing, “I’m so sorry, Mama.”

Her sister and some scrawny blonde kid scooped her up and walked her back to the house while Daryl looked on, still in numb shock after what had just happened. He vaguely wondered if the kid was the boyfriend Beth had mentioned when they first met, not that it really mattered to him at this point. He decided then and there that he needed to get away, that he couldn’t stand to be around anyone anymore. The kicker was that he couldn’t bring himself to leave Beth, even though she wasn’t really with him anymore.

He realized as he started packing up his things why he felt the need to stay: If her family thought it was a good idea to keep a bunch of walkers in a barn (apparently, her old man was convinced they were just sick), how safe could they really keep her? Despite his best efforts, he actually gave a shit about her and didn’t want to see anything bad happen to her. She was too good for that. Instead of taking off into the woods, Daryl found a spot near the edge of the property where the remains of the fireplace and chimney still stood, the last remaining part of a farm house built and torn down long ago, that would keep him far enough away but close enough to Beth to keep himself from worrying about her too much.

The next week or so, the rest of the group fell into a routine while they waited for Carl to recover from being torn up with buck shot and the surgeries to repair any damage. It was two weeks before Daryl saw Beth again after the barn incident. “‘Sa matter, girl? Yer little boyfriend ain’t doin’ it for ya so yer lookin’ for a good time with me?” He looked up from sharpening his homemade arrows and really looked at her. Her face was down-turned, as if she had a hard time looking at him. He noticed she had a bag, packed full, on her back. “What, yer old man find out?”

“Something like that,” she mumbled, her voice watery, as if she’d been crying. “I’m pregnant.”

Thanks for reading - please leave a comment!

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

An explanation of what Beth had been up to now that they're at the Greene Family Farm.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Beth wasn't sure the kind of reaction she'd get from Daryl when she told him she was pregnant. She only hoped he didn't pull the "Are you sure it's mine?" line she'd seen so often in movies. She may have just curled up and died on the spot if he were to have said something like that.

His actual reaction wasn't much better.

"Shit," he growled out as he stood up, shouldered his crossbow, and stomped out of the tent and into the woods.

Beth sighed heavily. She supposed it could have been worse, but not by much. She ducked into his tent to sit and wait for his return. A part of her wanted to cry, but her body was all cried out from everything that had happened since she finally made her way home.

Her joyous reunion with her family was short-lived when she learned both her mother and brother were gone. Apparently, they had been in town running errands, visiting someone from Mama's prayer group that had just had surgery, when the outbreak struck their little community. Mama had been bit while Sean was scratched trying to pull the walker off her. Rather than staying at the hospital, which had been swarming with panicked patients and staff alike, they fought their way home, trusting in Hershel's medical expertise to heal them.

The look on her father's face told her exactly how that had gone and how hard he was taking the loss.

Her family, along with Otis, Patricia and Jimmy, all of whom had joined the household rather than stay at their houses, carried on with necessary chores while Beth mourned. The Greene farm was much larger than most others in the area, and helped provide more security by the surrounding forest. Otis and Patricia helped run their farm as well as being long time family friends, so much so that they were practically family themselves. Meanwhile, Jimmy, Beth's boyfriend (though she supposed that wasn't exactly accurate anymore) lived in town. He had lost both parents and his sister at the start and had no other place to go; Hershel took him in without question, even though Beth had still been missing.

The list of people forever gone from her life seemed to be growing by the minute.

There were seemingly endless days of mourning all she had lost, each beginning with her waking up missing the feel of Daryl's strong arms around her. Not that he would really be a source of comfort or understanding for her, but she felt vulnerable without him there with her. It was ridiculous, really. She was home. She was as safe as anyone could be, considering no one was really and truly safe anymore. Besides, it wasn't like he had treated her all that well to begin with. He had taken something from her she could never get back, had gotten angry at her for trying to defend him from Shane and Rick.

But he had also given her pleasure she'd never known existed. He'd kept her fed, kept her safe, even shielded her from danger with his own body.

Oh...his body. Any time her mind wandered, it ended up recalling how he felt next to her, how his voice would rumble in his chest and send a chill running through her. How his strong arms felt around her as she felt him inside her. How his eyes seemed to peer right into her soul.

It was thoughts of Daryl that pulled her out of bed after days of soaking her pillow with tears. It wasn't so much a want to see him again, but she could almost hear him barking at her, "Come on, girl, get yer ass up. Shit's gotta get done." It was certainly motivation strong enough to ready herself to see her home knowing she'd never again see her mother or brother again.

The first day was the hardest. She wanted to just do what she needed to get done, to get back into the swing of things. She wanted to be at least a little independent, not wanting to check in with someone at every turn.

If only someone had passed that little memo on to Jimmy. Whether Beth was helping to clean up after a meal or work in the garden, Jimmy had to be right there at her side, getting in her way far more than he was being helpful. She finally asked if he needed her for something.

"I'm just glad you're back. It almost doesn't feel real. Your coming back? It's like...like we were meant to be together."

Beth's heart broke at that. She didn't feel anything for Jimmy any more, not really. Not the way he clearly felt about her. "Jimmy," she began with a sigh, unsure of what to do next. If she was looking for normalcy, she didn't need to look any further. Jimmy was safe, he was dependable. She'd been friends with him for years, and her family loved him.

But she didn't love him, not the way he deserved to be loved. Even before all of this happened, she hadn't been *in love* with him. It was one thing to stay with him and see where things went when life was somewhat normal. Now, though? No one had the luxury of having time to just wait and see. All feelings aside, would he be able to protect her in this new world? Provide for her if the farm ever fell?

"Jimmy," she tried again, taking her work gloves off and wiping her brow with the back of her wrist, squinting at him in the Georgia heat. "I'm glad I'm back, too," she lost her nerve.

He wrapped his arms around her, a hug she did not reciprocate, and kissed her cheek. "I gotta get back to helpin' yer pa, but maybe we can catch up later?" he asked hopefully.

Beth bit her lip and nodded, then watched him saunter off toward the far corner of the property. She decided to ignore the fact that her heart didn't exactly leap for joy when he'd hugged her. It hadn't even wiggled.

Her days quickly settled into a routine, carrying out her chores as she had before her life had been turned upside down, only now she did them with a knife hiding in her boot, the knife Daryl had given her to protect herself, just in case. She heard from bits of conversation that Daryl had taken it upon himself to find Carol's daughter, Sophia, and Beth couldn't help but admire him for that.

That is, until she realized he'd taken her horse without even mentioning it to her or her father. Beth recalled Merle wanting to rob the camp by the quarry and found she wasn't all that surprised that Daryl would take Nellie without asking. She was still pissed, but she wasn't surprised.

What had surprised her was seeing Nellie trotting through the barnyard, still wearing a saddle but no Daryl on her back.

Hours later, when the sun was sinking toward the horizon, a shot rang out from the edge of the property, alerting everyone and setting them on edge. Moments later, while Beth was helping to get dinner prepared, there was a great commotion in the front room, silenced by her father calling out for quiet and his medic kit. Beth rushed in to help, as she often had when neighbors brought in a wounded animal and sought his help. What she found spread out on the bed nearly stopped her heart.

Daryl was lying on his side, blood trickling across his forehead, his flannel tied around his side collecting blood from his front and back. Under all the commotion, she could hear his soft moans of pain.

Beth stayed back while Hershel corralled everyone except Patricia out to the porch. Once he returned, he resumed his usual calm demeanor. "Bethy, it looks like his head wound is superficial. His side is gonna need some work. Patricia, let's get him some morphine. Once we know he's gonna stay unconscious, we'll work on stitching these wounds while Bethy cleans and bandages his temple."

Beth stood on the opposite side of the bed from the other two as everyone worked. Even with the Georgia heat surrounding them, she could feel his gentle breath ghosting over her skin. She felt her nipples tighten as she leaned over him, his mouth so very close to her. When her fingers brushed a particularly tender spot, the tiniest whimper and moan would escape his lips, causing her heart to break just a little...and a rash of goosebumps to cover her arms, not to mention the sudden tightening in her lower belly. She could only be glad Hershel and Patricia were working so intently so as not to notice her reaction.

Once she had him bandaged up, she looked over the rest of him. He was covered in mud, filth and blood. Beth went to get more towels to try to clean him up, seeing that they were still fixing his side and he would be out for a while yet.

Her heart stopped a second time when she returned. Beth had gotten the first glimpse of Daryl's back and knew in an instant why he was always so careful to keep covered. Scars of

all matter of size, age and severity littered his skin; some of them had to have been from his childhood. Several pieces of the puzzle that was Daryl's past fell into place and Beth began to understand a little bit of why he was the way he was. She also knew she could never let on that she had seen them, not if she ever wanted to talk to him after that. It wasn't even a matter of pride or ego, but if he'd kept it such a secret from her for this long, her having seen them would be like a betrayal of trust for him. No, it was best to stay quiet unless he brought it up (if they ever actually spoke again), and even then she knew she'd have to play dumb.

She took a deep breath and began cleaning him off, making sure to stay clear of the others' area, as well as keeping a neutral face. In the back of her mind, she wondered if he'd ever been shown any kind of care or kindness. The marks on his skin certainly suggested otherwise. She had finished with the area around his head wound, but couldn't bring herself to leave his side, dabbing at his sweaty forehead, cleaning off his face, and wiping his neck and down to his collar bones. She drank in his body with her eyes, realizing that even though she'd seen him up close and personal before, she'd never seen him with his guard completely down.

She may not have known all the details, but guessing what this man had been through all his life, then seeing him put himself in harm's way trying to find that little girl – basically a stranger – even knowing the odds of her being alive were slim to none by now, Beth knew, deep...deep down, Daryl was a good person. In the moments that had just passed, in the midst of this revelation, her heart began to heal, to forgive him, little by little, for the ways he'd hurt her in the past few weeks. Seeing him like this explained why he'd done what he'd done, but it certainly didn't excuse him.

Hershel tied his last stitch and backed away so Patricia could apply the bandage. For a brief moment, Beth was tempted to continue Daryl's sponge bath, but thought better of it. If he were to wake up in the middle... Besides, how would she explain to her father why she couldn't seem to keep her hands off him, and why there would be a sense of familiarity about the whole thing? No. She would leave clean washcloths and towels for him and he could clean himself if he wanted to when he woke up.

Her thoughts returned to the scars on his back. She pitied him – not Daryl the man, but Daryl the little boy who apparently had no one to protect him from whoever did this to him. Beth let her mind wander as she went about her day. What kind of little boy was Daryl? What was his family like? What bothered her most was knowing she'd never really be able to ask him about it. Even if she did summon the courage to talk to him, even if they did have the kind of privacy the conversation would demand, he'd never open up to her like that. For now, her heart went out to him, and she found herself closer and closer to forgiving him for how he'd treated her these past weeks.

Hours later, at dinner time, she brought Daryl a tray of food, only to find him still asleep, resting peacefully on the pillows with the sheet pulled up almost to his shoulders. She set the tray down carefully on the night stand beside him and grinned as she picked up the now-dirty linens. *So he's not a complete animal.* Beth went to step back, but looking down at him again, seeing him get some decent sleep without having to be on guard, emotionally or physically, her heart thudded heavily in her chest again. *This poor man...* she mused, quickly losing against the urge to run her fingers through his hair and kiss him on the forehead.

She saw him react as her fingernails scratched his scalp, flinching in his sleep and turning toward her, but not waking up. Before she lost her nerve, she bent over him to press her lips to his forehead. She lingered for just a moment until she felt him start to stir beneath her. She pulled back, but not so quickly as to wake him up, and backed out of the room, unable to keep her eyes off his sleeping form. She found herself wanting to take care of him in any way she could, not that he'd let her.

While they were cleaning up after the meal, Maggie mentioned how quiet she'd been all day and how Beth had been hovering around Daryl's room just in the short while Maggie had been in the house. "You were with him that day I found you all, weren't you?" she questioned.

It hurt Beth that she couldn't tell her sister everything that had happened. They used to be so close; she couldn't wait to tell Maggie when Jimmy had first asked her out, when he'd kissed her for the first time. Now she felt she was living a secret life, one in which she was no longer a naïve girl but a woman...and found herself wanting to be Daryl's woman much more than she wanted to be Jimmy's girlfriend, but couldn't tell a single soul about it.

Beth ended up shrugging off the conversation at hand, explaining that most of the group had been there, that they all watched out for each other, which was true enough, really. It may have been a lie of omission, but it seemed to satisfy Maggie's curiosity. That is, until Maggie started bringing up all the help Jimmy had done on the farm since all this had started and how upset he'd been when Beth hadn't returned home from Atlanta all those weeks ago. "I haven't noticed you two together like I thought you would be."

"Well, criminy, Maggie! I've only been back a couple days, I've been exhausted and grieving my mother and brother, plus getting all my chores done and then some. Excuse me for not jumping all over him just because he's there." She knew it was a low blow, having seen how close her sister had gotten with Glenn in such a short time, but she needed Maggie off her back before she got too suspicious. Her tactic worked; Maggie threw her dish towel on the counter and stormed out of the kitchen in a huff, leaving the rest of the dishes to be done by herself. Beth felt bad for upsetting her sister, but appreciated the time alone all the same.

The next day, Daryl had several visitors from the group, along with Hershel and Patricia checking in every now and then to check for infection on his wounds, knowing antibiotics were a rare commodity at the moment. It left very little opportunity for Beth to go and see him, even if it would be just to say hello. Even if she were to go in, she wasn't sure she trusted herself with him. Oh, she could certainly keep her hands to herself, but the questions turning over and over in her mind were already fighting to be asked, and she couldn't promise to keep her mouth shut.

She stayed close, though, either in the kitchen or just outside in the garden, in case he needed anything. She tried to stay in the moment, not dwelling on the past few weeks nor on the lives they all had before the world fell apart; she fought to keep her mind focused on the tasks at hand, not on the man recuperating in the front room of her house. She tried to be the girl her family expected her to be, bright and bubbly, always with a song in her heart, but it was mostly for show. She found very little to sing about these days.

Daryl left the next day, promising Hershel he'd take it easy to avoid pulling any stitches, and that he'd be sure to keep the wound clean. Beth felt the sting of disappointment when he didn't say goodbye to her, but figured she hadn't exactly gone out of her way to visit him. Maybe he was protecting himself as much as she was herself.

Later that week, Beth heard a loud commotion coming from the front lawn. Shane was screaming about protecting the group and how they couldn't trust the old man or Rick. She watched through the screen door as Maggie and Lori both confronted him, telling him to back down, noticing that both Glenn and Daryl had shotguns in their hands. Something on the property line drew their attention, and Beth followed the group at a distance to see her father, Jimmy, and Rick leading walkers onto the property. Both groups met in the barnyard, Shane still shouting about not being safe. Beth watched as he pulled out his pistol and opened fire on the walker her father was leading, then went to the barn doors, which she realized had been chained shut. Her blood ran cold when she saw what her father had been hiding behind those chains.

Several neighbors and even friends from town came stumbling out of the barn doors...but she couldn't really call them people anymore. They had all turned. Beth felt absolutely nauseous. What was her family doing keeping these walkers locked in the barn? She had a horrible feeling about who else she might see among the undead.

She realized no one had ever shown her where her mother and brother had been buried. She had just assumed they'd be with the rest of her ancestors in the family cemetery on the far corner of the property. She'd never imagined...

...and soon she didn't have to. One behind the other, together even in this horrible excuse for an afterlife, were Annette and Shawn, emaciated and decomposing, their faces twisted into unnatural snarls. They had barely cleared the opening when someone had shot each of them, dropping them like the dead weight they were. Her heart sank to the ground along with them. She vaguely acknowledged a collective gasp from the group, barely recognized movement coming from the opening in the barn doors. Somehow her brain registered that Sophia had followed her family members into the sunlight, but couldn't tear her eyes away from her mother's body laying lifeless on the ground.

When the bullets stopped flying, she made her way across the dozens of bodies now lying around to go to her mother. Beth gingerly pulled on her shoulder, trying to roll her to a face-up position. In an instant, the walker reached up at her face, pulling at her hair; clearly the shot that had dropped her was only superficial. Beth vaguely heard a commotion around her, hands pulling at her to get her out of harm's way, but she fought against them and reached into her boot. A moment later, it was all over, her mother's lifeless blood oozing over her knuckles as she pulled the knife from her temple. "I'm sorry, Mama," she whispered, tears starting to fill her eyes, then she pushed herself to her feet and trudged back to the farmhouse.

Emotions were swirling through her, anger among the strongest of them. Anger that she'd had to put down her own mother. That her family had been keeping a secret of their own from her. She realized then that they thought she wouldn't have been able to handle the truth. That, even after what she'd been through, she was still seen as little Bethy. That her father

had been foolish enough to doubt what was staring him right in the face – that these people were not just sick, but dead and alive all at once.

That she hadn't put it together on her own any sooner. She had even noticed chickens going missing, but was never able to find a hole in any of the fences for them to escape or foxes or hawks to get in. Had someone been feeding those monsters?

She refused to talk to anyone immediately after. She may have been angry, but she still loved and respected her father and sister, as well as Patricia, and would rather avoid any conversation or confrontation before she had calmed down to keep herself from saying something she knew she'd regret.

Instead, she stayed in her room, mourning the loss of life all over again. The first walker she'd ever put down herself and it was her own mother. Beth let her heart and her mind heal themselves as much as they could while she kept herself in seclusion. She didn't let herself wallow like she had when they'd first made it to the farm. There was so much work to be done. Besides, if she wanted her family to see her as an adult and not little Bethy, she needed to step up and really start pulling her weight around the farm.

First thing the next morning, Beth was at work with the chickens, then tending the gardens, before starting up breakfast for everyone. All morning she'd had a strange feeling in her stomach, but chalked it up to not eating dinner the night before and getting so much done already that morning, all on an empty stomach. She only nibbled on a peach, not wanting anything too heavy that might upset her stomach further, then set to cleaning up and finding her next task to complete.

She vaguely heard Lori and Andrea having a discussion in the next room over. Their voices became more and more muddled as the room began to spin around her.

The next thing she knew, Beth was laying in her bed with a cool cloth on her forehead. Maggie was sitting next to her, worry painted all over her face. "What happened?" Beth croaked out, surprising her sister out of her thoughts.

"You tell me," she answered. "Lori says one minute you were finishing up dishes, the next you were on the floor unconscious. You okay?"

Beth sat up a little in her bed, "Yeah, I think so. I must have overdone it this morning is all. I just need more food in me I guess."

"Well," Maggie replied, with her over-bearing sisterly tone, "I think you should probably take it easy. I'll go get some lunch for you."

Something felt off between her and her sister. Maggie was in some kind of mood and Beth wasn't sure where it was coming from. "Maggie," she called out before she could leave the room. "What's going on?"

The older sister turned on her heel, inhaling sharply through her nose, her jaw clenched tightly. "Andrea was with Lori when you fainted. She had to come get me to help carry you upstairs because Lori can't lift anything. Why? Because she's pregnant." Maggie began

pacing as she ranted, “Glenn and I risk our damn lives for her and her abortion pills and she doesn’t even take them. That selfish, stupid... Who the hell is stupid enough to get herself knocked up now? In this world? Damn idiot woman.”

As her sister continued to vent her frustrations, a cold chill ran down Beth’s spine. It had been several weeks since the dead started walking the earth, surely more than a month. Her mind ticked back to try to remember when her last cycle had been, and the numbers added up. She knew then and there exactly why she had fainted that morning.

Beth fought to control her expression as well as her breathing. When Maggie finally left her room to head downstairs to the kitchen, Beth pushed herself out of her bed and toward the bathroom between her and Maggie’s room. She remembered last year when Maggie and her boyfriend at the time had a pregnancy scare and she had to buy home tests, two different brands, to find out just how much trouble she was going to be in. Fortunately for Maggie, both tests had come up negative; fortunately for Beth, she still had one of each brand hidden in their shared “female drawer,” just in case. She held the boxes with shaking hands, reading and re-reading the instructions and checking for an expiration date.

This was one time where she was almost glad being nervous always made her have to pee. She only had a few minutes before Maggie would return to use one of the tests.

Three long minutes later, she had her answer with a faint pink plus sign.

She wrapped the used test carefully in toilet paper and put it back in the drawer along with the still unused one, which she was planning to use the next chance she got. She knew she wouldn’t be able to go to her doctor to make sure the tests were accurate, so she figured two different brands of tests would have to be good enough.

Later that evening, her answer hadn’t changed, two blue lines staring up at her from the white stick in her hand. She wrapped this test the same way as she had the first and stowed it in the drawer, knowing if she just threw them in the wastebasket that Maggie would definitely see them. She’d have to sneak them out and throw them in the woods or something to prevent anyone else from finding them.

The next day, Maggie hovered over her constantly, never letting her out of her sight. When she did manage to convince her sister that she was fine, her freedom didn’t last long before Jimmy hounded her with questions and jumping to help her with every little task she’d set out to do. Beth just couldn’t handle the worried thoughts spinning in her head and put up with Jimmy, not if she wanted to maintain any sense of sanity. Finally she snapped.

“Jimmy, I can handle this. I’m just fine. I don’t need you...” she trailed off, seeing the shocked look on his face. She realized she didn’t finish her statement and knew she had to break it off with him then and there, no matter how much she knew it would hurt him. It wasn’t right to string him along, not when she knew she didn’t feel the same way he did. Not when she was carrying another man’s baby.

“I don’t need you,” she whispered, looking at her fingers twisting around each other. “I can’t do this, Jimmy. I love you, but I’m not in love with you. I don’t want you thinking we’re going to stay together just because of the way things are now. Neither of us deserve that.” She

lifted her eyes to meet his, steeling her heart against the look of confusion and pain she found there. “I’m sorry,” she said before turning and making her way to the garden, hoping to find some peace in the work that needed to be done there.

She probably would have felt worse about it if her mind weren’t being filled with thoughts and worries about having a baby, Daryl’s baby, at the end of the world. Beth began to notice her breasts becoming tender, and had a noticeable decrease in appetite, though she forced herself to at least eat something at each meal. She was thankful that she didn’t have any morning sickness, at least not yet. She wasn’t sure how she’d hide that from her family.

Life went on as normally as it could in the days that followed, though Beth found herself avoiding her family, convinced they would somehow be able to tell something was different. It wasn’t until later in the week that Maggie cornered Beth inside the chicken coop, two white plastic sticks in her hand and a look of fury on her face. “What the hell are these?”

“Maggie, I...”

“Tell me, *tell me*, these aren’t yours.” Beth’s silence was her answer. “Oh my god,” Maggie whispered, the color draining from her face. “Who?” she demanded after a moment of tortured silence. Beth only answered her with more silence. “It had *better* be Jimmy’s if you want any chance of staying in the house.”

Beth frowned, “You can’t tell me where to...” she trailed off when Maggie raised an eyebrow at her, realization sparking in the back of her mind and the pit of her stomach. “Maggie, you can’t tell Daddy,” she pleaded.

“Like hell I can’t,” she said, much louder than Beth wanted her to. “He was ready to kick me out just for messing around with a guy. When he finds out you’re knocked up, and you know he will...I don’t even know what he’d do.”

Tears pricked her eyes, knowing Maggie was, in all probability, absolutely right. “Maggie, please. I’ll tell him, I will. Please don’t say anything to anyone.”

Maggie stared at Beth a moment before shoving the pregnancy tests into her chest, practically spitting out, “Fine, but make it soon.” She turned on her heel, stomping out of the chicken coop, leaving Beth with her tears and thoughts and a basket half full of eggs.

“Margaret, what’s put a bee in your bonnet?” Beth heard her father say from just outside the coop. Her blood turned to ice in her veins as her heart froze in her chest.

“Just having a conversation, Daddy,” she answered. Beth could still hear the anger in her voice.

“Must have been some conversation,” Hershel responded. “Dare I ask who’s got you so riled up?”

Beth swallowed, trying to keep herself from getting sick, and thinking fast, put the tests in the basket under what few eggs she had collected. They weren’t exactly hidden under the brown

eggs, but she figured it was better than walking out with them in her hand. Taking one more bracing breath, Beth walked out to join her father and sister outside. "It's just me, Daddy."

Hershel looked back and forth between his daughters with concern. "What's going on?"

Maggie shot Beth a look as if to say, "here's your chance." "Just a sisterly spat, I guess," Beth chickened out. She flinched when Maggie scoffed loudly and stormed off.

"A spat, huh?" Hershel asked suspiciously. A silent moment passed, him waiting for an answer, and Beth scrambling to find a way to tell her father that wouldn't result in her being kicked out. "How're the girls doing today?" Beth looked up at him, confused. He took a step closer and she automatically pulled back away from him. "Not many eggs today. The chickens doing okay?" He reached into the basket, doing a quick count of its contents, then stopped abruptly. Beth knew exactly what he'd found before he pulled them from the basket. "Elizabeth," his voice grew steely cold. "Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

Her heart was pounding in her chest; her cheeks flushed in shame, two fat, hot tears rolling down them. "I'm sorry, Daddy," she whispered.

"Don't 'Daddy' me, young lady," his voice grew louder, but kept its iciness. "You'd better start explaining yourself right now."

Beth couldn't bring herself to look up at him to answer. "I was lost and he said he'd take care of me if I... I didn't think anyone else would help me so I...I had to and I'm so sorry, Daddy. I didn't know what else to do."

Several minutes went by without either of them talking. Beth started to feel faint again, her stomach churning as she worked to keep herself from hyperventilating.

"I didn't raise you to put yourself in a situation like this. I thought you knew better. No daughter of mine would behave so...reprehensibly." Beth looked up at him, holding her tongue, knowing that arguing with her father wouldn't be a wise decision at that point, even though Maggie got away with so much over the years (although, she never wound up pregnant, so anything Beth could say would be moot anyway). "As far as I'm concerned, you're his responsibility. He took care of you then, he can take care of you now." Without another word, he turned and walked away toward the edge of the property.

Beth's knees gave out from under her, her breath rushing out of her lungs as if she'd been punched in the gut. While she knew it was a possibility, she didn't want to think her father would really ever kick her out. She was in too much shock to cry, to chase her father down and beg him to reconsider, to find Maggie and ask her to intercede on her behalf. She just sat, her fingers grasping at the grass beneath them, the basket upended next to her with broken eggs oozing over the ground as she fought to regain her breath.

When she had collected herself, she made her way to the house, up the stairs to her room to pack some of her things that she'd need, not knowing if she'd ever be allowed in the house again.

Which brought her to Daryl's tent, awaiting his return. In the meantime, she would just stay inside and wait, not ready to face anyone else for the time being. It was nearly dark when the flaps of the tent flew open and Daryl stooped to join her inside. She looked up at him, terrified of what he would say.

He dropped his crossbow in the corner and sat cross-legged on the opposite side from Beth. He pulled his knees up to rest his elbows on them and sighed heavily. "So now what?"

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry it took so long to get this up for you all. I can't thank you enough for your patience with me. I've got the next chapter ready, just needs one final read-through before I post it later this week (which is what took so long in getting this one posted - I wanted to make sure you'd have Daryl's reaction right away rather than making you wait however long it took me to finish chapter 11...if that makes sense.)

Thanks again for reading - please leave a comment!

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Beth and Daryl finally discuss the bombshell she dropped on him and do their best to move forward.

Chapter Notes

As promised, here's the next chapter showing Daryl's reaction to the news. That's the good news.

The bad news is I'm not sure when the next chapter will be up. Life is getting way too busy (a full-time job, a two year old, a four month old, the whole moving process to find a house big enough for our family) and something has to give.

I promise you I will come back to this when I can. I promise I will finish all my fics (this one is all planned out, it just needs to be typed up). But I need to prioritize and taking these off my plate for a while is something I just have to do right now.

Thank you all for the wonderful support for this story so far.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“So what now?”

Beth blinked up at him. “What do you mean ‘what now?’” a rush of panic ran through her. “You said if my dad kicked me out, I could stay with you.”

“Shit,” Daryl muttered, then turned and paced away from her, muttering a string of profanities before turning back to her. “The hell we gonna do with a baby? Damn thing’s gonna be a dinner bell every time it cries.”

Tears pricked Beth’s eyes when he called the baby such a harsh name. Even though this was something neither of them had expected, she felt protective of it already. She was raised to believe all life was precious. She wanted so badly to tell Daryl exactly that, but kept quiet, seeing as how her safety, and now that of their baby, depended on him.

“Thought girls like you were on the pill or something,” he said after a quiet moment, pulling her from her thoughts.

“Girls like me? That’s an awful big assumption, don’t you think?” she questioned.

Daryl muttered something under his breath, bringing his hand to his mouth to chew on the corner of his thumb. “Coulda fuckin’ said somethin’.”

“You could have asked. I was terrified, of you, of being on my own, of the walkers. It’s not like I was thinking of...protection. Well, other than...” she trailed off as he lifted his eyes to meet hers.

“The fuck you scared-a me for?” Beth swallowed, her throat suddenly gone dry. “C’mon, girl,” he barked at her, “usually can’t shut you up.”

Beth fiddled with a loose thread on the hem of her shirt. “You were making me do things I’ve never done before, making me think it was my only option, and maybe it was,” she shrugged. “Maybe it still is. Even now, I don’t know what’s going to happen to me, and I’m terrified. It all depends on you. My own family won’t take me in, and I can’t imagine anyone else jumping at the chance to help me, especially now. All you have to do is say ‘too bad,’ and I’m done for.” She looked back up at him, blinking back the tears forming in her eyes.

Daryl sighed heavily, hanging his head down to his chest and running his fingers through his hair, pulling at the roots, then sitting back up and scrubbing his hands up and down his face. “Ain’t there a pill or somethin’ you can take? Get rid of it?”

Beth shrugged again, “It’s called the morning after pill, not the month after. I’m not sure it would work anyway. And even if...”

“Even if what?” he growled at her.

Beth took a deep breath before whispering, “I’m not sure I’d want to take it anyway.”

“Oh, fucking Christ,” he said, standing up and beginning to pace in front of her. “How the hell you gonna keep it quiet, keep it from callin’ every damn walker from here to Timbuktu from finding us?”

Beth pulled further into herself. “I don’t know. I guess I just hope either Daddy lets me back in the house when the baby is born...”

Daryl interrupted, “And in case you haven’t noticed, it’s starting to get colder out. How the fuck am I supposed to keep takin’ care of you? Got two ratty ol’ sleepin’ bags between the two of us, game’s gonna start goin’ into hiding for the winter. What in the holy fuck am I supposed to do?”

He looked like he was ready to burst with anger, his throat straining the more he fought to keep his voice from yelling, and his face turning a shade of red she’d never seen on him. Somehow Beth knew he was lashing out at her out of fear. She tried her best not to take his anger too personally. The problem was, she didn’t have any answers for him, but she sure as hell wasn’t about to just give up. “I guess we just gotta have a little faith.”

“Oh Jesus...” Daryl started a tirade of profanities as he stormed out of the tent again. This time, Beth knew he hadn’t gone far. She heard a rhythmic thumping not far off from the entrance to the tent. After a solid five minutes, maybe closer to ten, the sound stopped and

was replaced by slow, heavy footsteps. When Daryl came back inside, plopping himself on the ground across from her and letting his hands drape over his knees, Beth could see his bloody knuckles even in the fading light of dusk.

“Daryl...what happened to your hand?” She asked softly, but he only glared at her in response. “What did you hit out there, there’s nothing but...” Realization hit her and she scooted across the ground to sit directly in front of him. She gently lifted his hand to examine his wounds. Sure enough, there were tiny pieces of bark and splinters embedded in the bloody flesh covering his knuckles. “You beat up a tree?”

His growl warned her to stop asking questions, that his anger could just as easily be taken out on her. She took a calming breath and set herself to find some bandages in her bag to wrap his hands so they wouldn’t get infected. She rummaged through to the bottom of her bag, thankful she’d grabbed Shawn’s Swiss Army knife. She could use the small tweezers to debride his wounds. She’d have to find some antiseptic or peroxide in the morning. For the moment, she needed better light to see to extract the splinters and do what she could to help him. She ran out to the woods just outside the tent to find some kindling and, remembering what Daryl had taught her, started a small fire. Now she just had to convince him to join her outside.

“Daryl?” she called softly, “can I at least look at your hands out here? I don’t want them getting infected.” She heard him mutter something, but no movement from him getting up. “Daryl? Would you please come out here?” Still nothing.

At this point, her patience was being severely tested. Blame it on the hormones, blame it on not having eaten anything since breakfast, blame it on his reaction to her news, but she had finally reached her boiling point.

“Daryl Dixon, get your...ass...out here!”

She thought she heard the slightest movement coming from within the tent. After a moment, Daryl poked his head through the flaps, some combination of anger, disbelief and even a modicum of respect crossing his face. “The fuck you just say to me?”

Beth swallowed down the fear bubbling up, hoping her voice would remain steady. “You heard me,” she said, significantly softer than moments ago. “Your hands look pretty bad, and I want to make sure we do what we can before they get any worse. Would you please come here?” she ended with a sigh of exhaustion.

Daryl literally dragged his feet along the ground, kicking up dust and pieces of dying grass as he went, before settling near Beth by the fire. Beth rolled her eyes and reached over, taking his hand into her lap to begin her examination. His skin was still angry-looking, still oozing blood here and there, but she was able to pick out several pieces of wood and bark with little complaint from her reluctant patient.

“So what the hell we gonna do?” he said after several minutes of silence between them.

Beth glanced up at him to find his eyes already on her. “I dunno,” she said lamely with half a shrug as she turned her attention back to his hands. “Take it one day at a time, I guess. Don’t

really have a plan.” She was quiet for a minute before adding, “I didn’t plan any of this, Daryl. If it had crossed my mind even once, I would have said something.”

Another long minute passed before she heard him reply, barely above a whisper, “I know you didn’t.” He blew out a frustrated breath. “So, what, am I supposed to marry you now?”

Beth nearly dropped the tweezers as her head snapped up to look at him to find his expression completely serious. “I…” she started, not sure how to respond. “I hadn’t really thought about that either. It’s not like we can run to a chapel or even to City Hall or have any kind of a ceremony. Guess you’re off the hook.” She tried to keep her voice light to keep from showing how nervous she was about the whole thing.

“As long as your daddy don’t come after me with a shotgun.” Beth couldn’t help but laugh at his response, her heart relaxing a little when she saw his smirk in return. It appeared he’d accepted their situation, at least. He may not be happy about it, but he’d accepted it, and that was at least a positive step.

It also reaffirmed what she’d come to realize – that deep, deep down, Daryl was a good man. Deep, deep down, somehow she’d always known he would do the right thing.

“You hungry?” Daryl asked. When Beth nodded, he got up to retrieve what ended up being two squirrels that he’d left at the corner of the tent. He pulled out his knife, fumbling with it a little since Beth had already wrapped his hand in a bandage. Beth gently took it from him and went to work preparing their simple meal, leaving his other hand to deal with while the meat cooked. She had to fight quite a few bouts of nausea while she skinned the animals and prepped them to be roasted over their tiny fire, but she managed as best she could. She was grateful for the fresh air and the light breeze to carry the smell of cooking meat away from her over-sensitive nose. She just hoped she’d be able to keep everything down once she started eating.

Once they’d eaten and put out the tiny fire, they crawled into the tent. Daryl lay on the sleeping bag first, opening his arms to offer her a place beside him. Her shoulders sagged with relief as she knelt beside him then curled up, laying her head on his bicep. Her heart skipped a beat, her breath caught in her throat, when his other arm came around her and draped over her waist, caging her with his strength, though not in any kind of imposing way. It was…almost intimate. He buried his nose in her hair, and she swore she could feel him press a kiss to the top of her head.

“Where did you go?” she asked, the question popping into her head suddenly. He pulled back a little and although she couldn’t see him in the darkness surrounding them, she could feel his questioning gaze. “After I told you, you took off and were gone for hours. Where did you go?”

“Out,” he said shortly. She wanted to say something about acting like a pissy teenager, but held her tongue and trusted her own facial expression to cut through the darkness back to him. He sighed, and she knew she’d won. “Needed to try and think shit out. Really needed to get away so I wouldn’t take it all out on you. Figured we’d need food for tonight on the way back.” He took another deep breath, held it like he was going to add something else, but released it as he pulled her back into his chest.

Beth took a wild stab in the dark, "I'm scared, too, Daryl." She felt him tense up next to her, but didn't pull away, so she pressed on, "I have no idea what I'm doing, what to expect, what we'll need. The only thing I know about babies is from babysitting. I don't know how to make this work in this world. I wouldn't even know how to make this work if things were still the same as...before."

"Wouldn'ta happened," he muttered, and now it was her turn to pull back and look at him, waiting for him to explain. "You and what's his name woulda got married and had kids, yer daddy woulda handed the farm over to ya, y'all woulda been happier than pigs in shit." She could feel him loosening his hold on her, but she wrapped her fists into the front of his shirt to keep him from getting too far away.

"Don't be too sure of that," she said softly. "Me and *Jimmy*," she said pointedly, "had only just started going out when all this happened. And I really only said yes because we'd been friends for so long, we were practically dating anyway. I had no long-term plans with him. I wanted to go to college before I got married, and all kinds of things could have happened between now and then." *Who knows? I might have met a rough and rugged redneck at some bar on my twenty-first birthday*, she mused to herself, and was grateful for the darkness hiding her smile at the thought. She yawned and readjusted herself in Daryl's arms before settling again. "Can we go on a run tomorrow? I wanna see if there's a book at the library or something that'll...help."

Daryl let out a yawning sigh, "I guess so."

Beth held in her own sigh. He had gone from being angry, probably angrier than her own father had been, to accepting, to now ready to help her. She felt her heart swell at the thought and reached up to kiss his cheek before she could stop herself. "Thank you, Daryl. Good night."

A moment later, when sleep had just started to find her, she heard him whisper back, "G'night, Beth."

.oOo.

When Beth woke, the sun had just crested above the horizon. She blinked at the unfamiliar surroundings before remembering she was in Daryl's tent...in Daryl's arms. They had apparently shifted over the course of the night and he was now laying behind her, his strong arm still draped around her waist. Now, however, there was a noticeable hardness pressing against her backside. Completely blaming it on her hormones, she pressed her butt against it, grinning at the low, gravelly moan that rumbled into her ear and shot straight to between her legs. She turned her head to look at the man behind her, not quite surprised to find him just starting to wake up with her. "Morning," she whispered up to him as he supported his upper half on his elbow and looked down at her through bleary eyes.

"Morning," he grumbled. Beth rolled onto her back to keep from having to crane her neck to see him any longer. She noticed his expression change from barely awake to thoughtful to something almost conniving. "So..." he started.

“So?” Beth repeated, already guessing what was coming. The time for talking things out and trying to formulate a plan and having a tiny semblance of a relationship with each other was over. The Daryl she’d first met in the woods was back now.

“Well, it’s been a couple weeks, and if we’re picking the deal back up, means you gotta hold up your end-a things ‘s much as I do. ‘Specially if you want me to take you out on a run today.”

Beth was disappointed that the sweetness and thoughtfulness he’d shown last night, brief as it had been, was completely gone now. Truth be told, she’d thought of Daryl like this more often than not in the few weeks since she’d been back in her family’s house. It was the main reason she kept herself at a distance from him while he recuperated. She found herself drawn to him, wanting him, needing him.

It had to be the hormones. Yes, that was it.

But she couldn’t let Daryl know that. She sighed inwardly and nodded, moving to unbutton her jeans and push them over her hips. Daryl pulled at the hem of her shirt to pull it up to uncover her breasts, still hidden in her bra. He pulled one cup lower to expose her nipple and immediately dropped his mouth to suck it between his lips.

“Ow,” Beth gasped in pain, causing Daryl’s head to snap up. “They’re...really sensitive now.”

“Thought they always were,” he said, narrowing his eyes at her. It wasn’t necessarily flirty, but he wasn’t necessarily really questioning her, either.

“Yeah, but it hurts now. Just...please be careful,” she whispered, relieved when he seemed to take her plea into consideration before kissing just above her belly button and moving lower, dragging her underwear down her legs to join her pants now bunched around her ankles. A moment later, she was naked from the waist down and Daryl had positioned himself between her legs. Rather than undoing his own pants, he let his fingers wander between her thighs, teasing her tender flesh, drawing moisture out from her center, even teasing her clit with his tongue as his fingers slid into her. She closed her eyes and let the sensations wash over her as he sent her body humming with want, need, readiness.

She had no idea how long he’d been at it when he stopped, just as she felt an orgasm starting to build. She looked down her body to see him there, sitting back on his feet as he unbuckled his belt and undid his pants, pulling them down just enough to allow his cock to spring free. With one hand on the back of her thigh, spreading her legs to open for him, he guided the head of his member to her center, spreading and combining her wetness with his own before looking up at her to make sure she was ready. Beth bit into her lower lip and nodded, then immediately brought her hand up to cover her mouth to prevent any noises from coming out when Daryl slid all the way into her in one stroke.

“Holy shit,” he hissed through clenched teeth. He leaned over her, supporting himself so as not to crush her, angling his hips so his pelvic bone would rub against her clit on each stroke. He dropped even lower, shifting his weight to his elbows and whispered wickedly in her ear, “Missed you, girl. Missed yer tight little pussy.” She squeaked out a tiny moan as he filled

her senses. He pulled her hands above her head, holding them in one of his, and bent his neck to kiss her, swallowing the sweet sounds she was making. She pulled her knees closer to her chest, allowing him to sink deeper into her, and he groaned at the feeling. “Oh, shit yes, girl. Feels so fuckin’ good,” he whispered against her lips between kisses.

Daryl was completely surrounding her, flooding her senses with his voice, his strength, his distinctly Daryl smell, and Beth felt herself losing control as her orgasm washed over her. Her jaw dropped, a scream caught in her throat as her body clenched around him and felt him throb inside her. They both released the breaths they’d been holding as they each climaxed; they both gasped air into their lungs as their bodies began to relax into each other. Daryl rolled onto his side, careful not to let his weight crush Beth as they both panted to catch their breath.

“You okay?” he asked softly. She nodded, turning onto her side to see him fully. Daryl brought his hand up to tuck a loose piece of hair back behind her ear then leaned in for a soft kiss against her lips. “I meant what I said,” he added, resting his forehead against hers. “I missed you these past couple weeks.”

Beth wasn’t sure if he meant he missed getting to have sex or if he actually missed her, so she just stayed quiet, letting the calm around them last a while longer before they’d have to go and start their day outside of the tent. She blamed her hormones again, but found herself looking forward to spending her nights and mornings with Daryl. If she were honest, it was more than his protection she wanted from him.

Without much further ado, they joined the rest of the group for a quick breakfast, ignoring the curious glances they received from the others. Everyone discussed the plan for the day, most of it revolving around what to do with the boy Rick, Glenn and Hershel had brought back from town when the rest of his group had left him behind, injured. Beth hadn’t seen him, only heard there was someone Rick didn’t trust that they were keeping in the now empty barn. Now that his wounds had begun to heal, they’d agreed that this “kid” needed to go. The best plan they could come up with was to have Shane and Rick drive him several miles out, arm him with a knife, and set him on his way.

Daryl took off on his bike with Beth holding tight to him following Shane and Rick down the long dirt driveway, turning right toward town where they turned left down the highway. Beth noticed that Daryl took the ride nice and easy, not racing along like she’d expected him to now that they were off on their own for the day. She wondered if he was doing it because of her, because of the unseen passenger on the bike, or if he simply wanted to take a leisurely ride that day.

“Where to?” he shouted over his shoulder as the edge of town came into view and he slowed down even more to be able to hear her easily.

“There’s a library downtown,” Beth suggested.

Daryl shook his head, “Ain’t no way we’re gonna try an’ clear out a damn library by ourselves. Ain’t you got a bookstore or somethin’ smaller like that?”

Beth thought for a moment. “Turn left at the next stop sign,” she directed him. There was a little “book nook” next to a tiny café down one of the side streets downtown. She loved going there, loved the smell of the books, even if it was just to look. Beth had always been mindful of her spending and wanted to save as much as she could rather than blow what little she had in one fell swoop.

A lot of good that saving did her now.

When Daryl parked a couple doors past the bookstore, Beth looked at him questioningly. “In case that kid’s buddies decide to show up again. Don’t wanna make it too easy for them to find us.” They stayed in the shadow of the awning lining the row of stores and doubled back to the book store, which was luckily left unlocked. Daryl instructed her to get her knife out and to stay in the main entryway while he made sure the store was clear of walkers and humans alike. Beth made sure she was still hidden from the windows, then took a deep breath, enjoying the familiar smell filling her nose. When Daryl gave the all clear, she moved directly to the section she needed, knowing the layout of the store as if she’d been employed there.

She found a “What to Expect” book that seemed to be popular and flipped open to start scanning the information for the first month. “Can we stop at the pharmacy before we head back?” she asked. Daryl gave her an odd look, so she explained, “It says I should be taking vitamins. They’ll help me as much as the baby.” Daryl just nodded in response, the corner of his thumb caught between his teeth. On their way back to the street, Beth stopped by the register to grab as many candy bars, bottles of water, and anything else they had there on display that she thought might be able to help.

The pharmacy was across the street and down a block from where they were. Daryl supposed they’d be alright walking rather than taking the bike with them, they’d just have to be cautious. Maggie and Glenn had been in the same pharmacy at least a couple times, so it took no time at all to make sure everything was still clear. The door to the shelves of prescription meds was locked; before Beth could climb over the counter, Daryl had put his arm in front of her to stop her and vaulted over it himself. “What am I lookin’ for?”

“Prenatal vitamins. Don’t know if they have an actual name besides that.” She continued to browse through the chapter and called out, “I’m going to look in the supplements for some other stuff. They’re just down this aisle.” When she heard his approving grunt, she grinned and made her way to find what was left on the shelves that she could use. There wasn’t a lot of selection, but she figured some was better than none. Daryl hadn’t returned yet, so Beth wandered the store, grabbing things here and there that she deemed useful and stuffing them in her bag.

She had finished walking down the last aisle and turned to head back to the pharmacy counter only to run smack into a solid wall of...a person. She gasped in fear, her first thought was that it was someone from the group Rick and Daryl were so worried about that had followed them in. Before she could react, his strong hands were gripping her shoulders firmly, most likely leaving bruises, and shoving her back at arms’ length. She looked up, terrified of what she’d find, and immediately relieved that it was Daryl. “The fuck you doin’?” his voice hissed at her, barely containing the anger behind it.

“I...I was just getting stuff I might need,” she tried to explain.

“You say you’re gonna be somewhere, you fuckin’ be there,” Daryl seethed at her. Beth wasn’t sure what the big deal was; the store was clear and no one had come in after them. Still, he was obviously concerned about her.

Beth swallowed the dryness out of her mouth. She was shaken, not just by the fear of someone sneaking up on her like that, but by Daryl’s reaction as well. He was becoming increasingly protective of her, and it made her imagination run wild. “I’m sorry, Daryl,” she said with sincerity. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Yeah...” he agreed, muttering something that Beth couldn’t quite make out, before turning her around and unzipping her bag and shoving something in before closing it again. He stomped past her toward the front door, and Beth did her best to hide her grin, knowing by the added rattle when she moved that he’d found the vitamins he was looking for...for her.

They made their way back to the bike without incident. Beth wondered if there really was a group of men to be worried about, if this kid had made it all up. How awful for one of their people to be left behind and no one come back to look for him. She realized once again how lucky she was to have a family...well, to have someone that cared about her, anyway. She hoped her father and sister would forgive her and allow her back into her home, her family. Until that happened, she was more than grateful that Daryl hadn’t turned his back on her as well, no matter how upset he was that they were going to have a baby together.

.oOo.

As they rode back to the farm, Daryl was still trying to wrap his head around the fact that Beth was pregnant. He didn’t know the first thing about raising kids, let alone at the goddamn end of the world. Either way he looked at it, he’d made a promise to Beth, and while it would have been easy to turn tail and say she wasn’t his problem anymore, he felt a sense of responsibility toward her. The girl was depending on him. He knew what it was like to be cast aside by a parent, and a girl as sweet as she was shouldn’t have to go through that for any reason.

Especially if he caused that reason.

He still couldn’t believe this was all happening. He could practically hear Merle heckling him for ‘not wearin’ a raincoat where things get wet.’ What a fucking dumbass he’d been.

To be perfectly honest, he couldn’t help himself resenting Beth for wanting to keep the baby. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. Her daddy was the one who believed walkers were just sick, kept them in a damn barn hoping for a cure. To have that kind of blind faith that everything would be okay...well, now he knew where Beth got it from. He also knew there was no arguing.

God, he couldn’t believe how stupid he’d been. How careless. No sense in complaining now. No amount of faith or complaining had ever gotten him anywhere. Now it was time to just suck it up and deal with it.

Meanwhile, he could've sworn he felt Beth leaning her head against his back, readjusting her arms around him as she sighed. The girl was happy. This shitty, fucked up world had dealt her the worst hand possible, and she was still happy. And for some reason he couldn't figure out, he didn't necessarily mind feeling her wrap herself around him. Not that he'd ever admit that to anyone. Not even to himself.

When they'd returned, Beth insisted on sharing what they'd found with the rest of the group, even her family, but didn't want to be the one to present their haul to them. She claimed she was just tired from going on the run, that she wanted to get as much reading done as she could. Something told Daryl she wasn't quite ready to face all the questioning looks everyone else would be sure to give her.

Like he was really looking forward to it.

He approached the group quietly, hearing a heated discussion between Rick and Shane. From what he could gather, this Randall kid had known all along exactly where he was being held. Said he knew Maggie, knew how to find the house. They couldn't let him go like they'd planned because they didn't know if he'd just bring his own group back here.

A chill ran through Daryl. Maggie might not have remembered him; Daryl figured she was at least a year or two older than Randall, so she probably never gave two thoughts about him, at school or here on the farm. But Beth, few things escaped Beth. The girl was quick, sharp. If she'd seen him, she'd have recognized him, hopefully said something to someone.

And if Beth recognized Randall, surely he'd recognize her. Kid would have to be a blind idiot not to. And if he saw her...

A flare of jealousy ran through Daryl.

Without any further thought on the matter, Daryl offered to take things into his own hands, see if he could get more information out of him. He figured Rick would be too nice about it, Shane would go too far. And now he had his own reasons for finding out what the kid knew. If anything, he could release a little frustration while he was doing it.

His hands had healed a little, and he was oddly grateful that Beth had taken such care in wrapping them the night before. True, he'd basically undone all her work as he worked over Randall, throwing punch after punch in search of what the kid knew, but it wouldn't do any good for Daryl to wince in pain with every hit. In any event, he found out just what kind of group this Randall kid was part of. When he reported back to Rick and the rest, they agreed they couldn't let the kid go anywhere.

Now they were torn as to what to do with him. That wasn't completely true – Dale was the only one hellbent on letting the kid live. Normally Daryl wouldn't have really given two shits, but now, with Beth, knowing what these men were capable of if they found her, if Randall were to try anything...hell, Daryl would pull the trigger himself. He had the feeling everyone else felt the same way, that Randall had to die, but no one actually wanted to say it.

Rather than hearing them all piss and moan about saving their humanity and flip-flopping back and forth over what to do, Daryl agreed with Dale that the group was broken and

returned to his tent, to Beth. He had the length of the walk across the field to decide what to tell her, how to explain his knuckles getting banged up again.

Later that night, after they'd shared a noticeably quiet meal, Beth and Daryl crawled into their tent. Once the fire was out, there wasn't exactly a lot to do, so they stretched out on the sleeping bags for the night, Beth curled into him, her head resting on his shoulder. It was oddly relaxing, having her in his arms, his fingers tracing indiscriminate designs on her soft skin. If he weren't so wiped from everything that'd happened that day, he'd have tried to get something started between them, but for now, he was content just where he was.

That is until they heard someone screaming bloody murder from across the field. The sound wasn't coming from the direction of the house, but closer to where the tent was set up. He ordered Beth to stay in the tent, to get her knife out, keep the lantern off, then ran like hell to find out what the fuck was going on. What he saw nearly made his heart stop: a walker eating a still screaming Dale. Daryl rushed to his side, stabbed the walker in the head, and called for help, though he knew no amount of stitches was going to be able to repair the damage the walker had done. As Rick and the others arrived, Daryl could only look at Dale's face, his eyes silently begging for release from his last moments of pain.

He could only mumble out a quiet, "Sorry, brother," before pulling the trigger.

Daryl eventually made it back to his tent, not having any kind of clue how long it took, just walking in a daze. He shouldn't have been surprised when Beth held her knife pointed at him. Hell, she was doing exactly what he'd told her to do. Nevertheless, there he was, staring at the business end of her knife, not remembering how he'd gotten there.

"Daryl," Beth exclaimed in a whisper and lowered her knife as soon as she realized what she was doing. She rushed forward and wrapped her arms around him. Shit, how long had he been gone? "I heard a shot. Is everyone okay?"

He could only shake his head and whisper, "Dale. Walker got 'im."

Beth gasped; he could practically hear the tears filling her eyes as she looked up at him. She didn't ask any questions, and he didn't tell her anything beyond that, but he could feel the shift between them. Somehow, he realized she knew he'd been the one to pull the trigger. Without another word, she pulled back, taking his crossbow from his shoulder and setting it down in its usual corner before pulling Daryl to the sleeping bag, his hands in hers. She lay down first, settling on his pillow while he stood there numbly. In the faint moonlight that filtered through the vinyl walls, he saw her extend her arm to him. He followed her silent command and let himself drop to his knees next to her before lying beside her.

A slender arm pushed its way beneath his head, around his neck, and pulled him into her body, cradling and comforting him in a way he'd never experienced. All the shit he'd been through, he'd never had someone just hold him like this with no further expectations. Daryl tensed at first when he felt her move beneath him, then felt her fingers carding through his hair. The more she did it, the more he felt himself eventually relax.

He wasn't about to make a habit of it, but it was nice for now. For now, he'd let sleep find them and worry about tomorrow when it got there.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading - please take a moment and leave a comment!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I do feel bad that this story is taking so long for me to complete. These two little boys are running their mama ragged. I thank you all for your patience. I do try to write a little every day, but sometimes I just...can't.

Anyway, enough excuses. Thanks to all who are still hanging in there. I appreciate every favorite, follow and review!

This is also my submission for tumblr's Summer of Bethyl 2018 prompt - Fear. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Beth woke suddenly, the sun already well above the horizon. Daryl was softly snoring in her ear, and their arms were still wrapped around each other from the night before. The birds outside had begun their morning chorus, but beyond that, she could hear the distant murmur of commotion. As much as she hated to wake him, knowing he needed every wink of sleep he could get, she gently brushed the hair out of Daryl's eyes before nudging him awake, softly calling his name.

He woke with a start, muttering a string of select profanities and rubbing his eye with the heel of his hand.

"I'm sorry, Daryl," she apologized, already missing the closeness they'd shared the night before. "I heard something from over by the tents, but it just sounds like everyone else is up and moving already." They dressed quickly, then walked together to join the rest of the group to find out what was going on.

Despite her situation, being cut off from her family, as well as the loss of Dale the night before, Beth felt a twinge of happiness rush through her when Daryl's hand found hers. Though he never said a word, she guessed the gesture was both a thank you for being a source of comfort last night and a reassurance that he was there with her, a promise that he'd take care of her. She gently squeezed back, silently telling him that she had his back just as he had hers, though in very different ways. They were in this together, so they might as well make the best of it when they could.

Her heart gave a tiny flutter when she realized she was learning to read his silent cues, a sign of how truly close they were becoming. At least, how close she thought they were becoming. Maybe she was reading too much into it.

It turned out that Beth had been right - the group was already hard at work packing what little they had into the cars and trucks. Rick explained that, because of what happened the night before, knowing that walkers were now making their way onto the farm, they were no longer safe sleeping outside in tents, even with someone keeping watch. According to him, Hershel was gracious enough to allow the group to stay in the farm house, especially now that autumn had truly settled in, leaving the nights to grow colder and colder.

Beth's heart soared. Her father was welcoming her back. Granted it was because he was making accommodations for the group and she happened to be part of that group. Still, it was something. At least...she hoped he included her and Daryl in that group...

Rick asked if he could talk to Daryl privately, then mentioned to Beth that Lori had some leftover breakfast she was welcome to if she wanted any. Beth smiled gratefully then let her fingertips trail down Daryl's arm as they parted ways. Before she could take a step, Daryl grabbed her wrist and leaned in to whisper to her, instructing her to stay with Lori and Carl until he got back.

As she approached the Grimes' tent, Lori smiled up at her and asked if she was hungry at all. Although her near-constant nausea kept her from having much of an appetite, she knew she needed to eat something, so she smiled shyly and nodded. As she ate, Lori asked how she was feeling and offered any advice or help Beth might need. "I know it's scary, especially now, but we'll get you through this." Beth took her sincerity to heart and felt a slight relief in knowing it wasn't just her and Daryl against the world. This group of survivors were becoming her family when her own turned her away.

The thought made her breakfast go down just a little easier.

When Daryl returned, Beth offered him some of the leftover breakfast and sat with him as he ate. Just by looking at him, she knew his conversation with Rick hadn't been a pleasant one. Once Daryl had finished his meager meal, she took his plate from him to take to the wash bin. When she turned around, she was surprised to see him standing just behind her.

“‘M gonna be gone for a while. Couple hours or so. You stick with Lori, you hear?” His tone left no room for discussion, but Beth was definitely curious.

“What’s going on? Where are you going?”

Daryl sighed and looked down at his boots, kicking a clump of dirt. “Rick wants me to go with him to take care of Randall. We’re leaving in a little while. He’s checkin’ on Carl now, talkin’ ta yer ol’ man.”

Beth swallowed the dryness out of her throat. Were they just going to kill him in cold blood? “I guess I’ll start packing up our stuff again,” she mentioned to him. He looked at her in confusion, so she explained, “Looks like Daddy is letting everyone stay in the house until it’s time to leave because of...last night,” she ended weakly.

Daryl snorted, “Doubt that includes me. He ain’t gonna want the redneck who knocked up his little princess under his roof.”

Beth frowned at that. Daryl had a point, one she hadn’t even considered in her excitement to be in her home again with her family. Come to think of it, no one had said specifically that she was included, she’d just assumed. Her father had seemed pretty adamant that she was no longer welcome in his house. She was with Daryl now, for good or bad, like it or not. Beth took a deep breath and steeled herself, “Well, I can at least move some things to the bike, just in case. It’ll at least give me something to do. Everyone else is busy moving.”

Daryl nodded, “Just keep yer eyes and ears open and make sure ya got yer knife on ya.” Beth nodded in response, which was met by a nod of his own. “Shouldn’t be gone too long,” he muttered around the corner of his thumbnail which had somehow found its way to his mouth. “Oughta be okay if ya stay in the tent.”

Without a second thought, Beth reached out to lay a hand on his bicep. “You be careful, okay?” She smiled when his eyes finally met hers and he gave another small nod. She gave one more light squeeze and hadn’t quite turned to walk back to their tent when she paused, looked up at him, and stood on her tiptoes to peck a quick kiss to his lips. Before he could say a word, she turned and quickly walked away, a blush covering her cheeks.

Where had that come from?

Beth set to work packing what she could into the side compartments of Daryl's motorcycle. When that was finished, she went back to the camp, which by that time was nearly disassembled, save for Shane's tent. She asked Lori, who answered, with a sorrowful expression, that her father made it clear that Shane wasn't welcome in the house with everyone else.

Beth was thrown for a loop. She had always known her father to be a kind-hearted man, always willing to help those in need. He had always believed in the power of forgiveness. Had Shane's outbursts and actions at the barn been what had hardened Hershel's heart? Yes, he had gone against her father's wishes to stay away from the barn, had exposed not only his secret but his naivete in regards to the walkers. She supposed that was enough to truly anger Hershel Greene.

If that were the case, was there any hope for her to ever get back in his good graces?

Beth returned to their tent, thankful she had the forethought to grab her favorite book from her room when she'd packed. Lost in her fantasy world, she was startled when she heard the sound of running footsteps coming closer and closer. She froze, unsure if she should go to see who was approaching or wait for them to come to her, even if it meant she'd be cornered in the confines of the small tent.

"Beth!" Daryl's voice called out, winded from running.

She poked her head outside. "Daryl? What's wrong? Are you okay?" She met him just outside the zippered opening.

"The kid's gone. Goin' out to look for 'im. Ain't safe fer you out here," he rattled off in between pants, trying to catch his breath. "Need to stay closer to the house. Stick with Lori til I get back. Andrea. Someone, but you stick to them like glue, you hear me?"

Beth mutely nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. Daryl stood there for a moment, staring at her, a recognizable heat in his eyes. If it weren't for the situation they were facing, Beth

could almost imagine it to be a romantic moment, the two of them standing together at sunset, pulses racing, unable to take their eyes off each other. Suddenly he stepped in closer to her, planting a rough kiss against her lips. Before she could react, he pulled away, taking her hand in his and pulling her to his bike, both of them riding back to the house.

When Daryl went to search the woods with Glenn, Beth stayed on the front porch of the farm house. She couldn't exactly stick to someone like glue the way Daryl wanted; everyone was busy unpacking and resituating furniture to make room for everyone moving in. She didn't want to get in the way, and figured she wasn't exactly welcome in her father's house anymore, anyway. Instead, she stayed on the porch swing, hoping someone would start preparing a meal soon. Normally, Daryl would make sure they had something to eat, but he'd been more than a little busy. Surely someone would notice her and offer her a plate of food.

Her stomach had been rumbling for a while, waves of nausea running through her off and on when Patricia came out the front door with a plate of food. The older woman, who had been like a second mother to her, smiled softly at her as she sat on the swing beside her. "Thought you could use some dinner."

The two sat in near silence as Beth ate, reminding herself to go slow or her stomach would just force everything back up. Bits and pieces of conversation floated through the windows; it seemed most were concerned about Randall going missing, while others were still expressing their gratitude to Hershel's for letting them all stay in his house. Beth took long slow breaths to keep herself from crying once again. She hoped Daryl returned soon so they could both go back to his tent where she wouldn't have constant reminders of how she was no longer welcome in her childhood home. She gave a watery thanks to Patricia when she'd finished and her friend took her now empty plate back inside.

The sky grew dark in the early autumn evening, and there was still no sign of any of the men returning. Beth had an awful feeling down deep inside her that something awful was about to happen, but there wasn't much she could do about it. Instead she stayed on the porch until she couldn't take the chill in the air anymore. She slipped into the front entryway and found nearly everyone that was left gathered in the parlor. Beth lingered in the hallway, not wanting to draw attention to herself, and debated sneaking upstairs to her room to grab more things.

She had just turned to walk down the hall when Glenn and Daryl came in through the door. She met his eyes for a brief moment while Glenn started explaining that they'd found Randall, but he had died and turned already. Daryl broke eye contact with Beth to confirm Randall's body hadn't been bitten or scratched, but that the boy had died of a broken neck. Amid the confusion of this new development, someone wondered out loud where Rick and

Shane could be. Beth stayed frozen in her spot in the hallway as Daryl and several others went to the porch to start looking for either of the missing men. She watched as Daryl took a cautious step into the yard, peering into the darkness and followed where he was looking. There was movement just out of sight, like the haze of a watery mirage dancing above the asphalt on a hot summer day.

“It’s a herd,” someone called out, though Beth couldn’t tell who it was over the thundering of her pulse ringing in her ears.

Others rushed inside, grabbing any guns they could find. Daryl just shook his head. “Ain’t gonna be able to hold them off. Herd that size would tear through the whole house.”

“So, what do we do?” Andrea asked.

“Gotta lead ‘em away. Kill the lights in the house, use the cars to spread ‘em out and get ‘em pointed back toward the highway,” Daryl ordered and Beth watched in amazement as everyone followed his instructions. Her breath caught when he approached her, wrapping each of her upper arms in his firm grasp. “You stay inside. Don’t get cornered, don’t get stranded.”

“Why can’t I go with you?” she pleaded, not wanting to be left behind.

“Don’t want you out there. Can’t be worrying ‘bout you fallin’ off the bike in the dark with those fuckers on my tail.” He squeezed her arms again, bending so he was eye-level with her. “You be smart. I’ll find you.”

And with that, he was gone.

.oOo.

Daryl tried directing the other drivers where to go to cut the herd in sections, stopping when he could to take out as many walkers as he could to give himself a little more wiggle room between them. Others’ gunshots were sounding from all over the property, which could be good or bad. It was damn near impossible to see if his plan was working in the moonlight.

He wondered who had set the barn on fire and wished he could tell everyone to stop firing, stop driving, and just let the damn things walk right into the blaze. Instead, with all the commotion going around the farm, the walkers ended up being corralled rather than scattered. He realized he was the furthest out, that everyone else was staying in the main field not far from the house. One by one, he watched as each of the cars started making their way away from the farm, and he was relieved that they'd finally gotten a clue and followed his lead, only to realize they were all just driving away, abandoning ship.

And he had no idea if Beth had made it out. She was a smart girl, but if everyone was out to save their own, had she been left behind?

He scoured the herd for an opening to make his way back to the house to make sure, hoping against hope that he'd be able to find her, when he heard a scream come from not far off. He revved his bike's engine and took off toward the source of the sound only to see Carol running weakly, nearly falling down with each step, as a group of the dead were chasing her. He stopped several feet in front of her, not wanting to get too close to the walkers to make sure he could get them both away safely, yelling at her that he didn't have all day. She certainly wasn't his main concern, but he knew he couldn't just leave her there.

Beth wouldn't want him to.

An icy cold fear gripped him from the inside when he thought of Beth being all alone as he drove away with the older woman clinging to him for dear life. He'd promised Beth he'd find her, that he'd take care of her. Why the hell couldn't he have taken her with him? Then he'd at least know...

But now there was no way to get back to look for her. The herd had been worked into a frenzy and were swarming around the property like a hive of hornets looking for the idiot who'd disturbed their nest with a rock.

He began to accept the idea that she may well be long gone. Part of him was relieved, for a couple of reasons, but something heavy sat in his heart at the thought of her dying. She was so good, so trusting of him, and now her faith in him might have gotten her killed. He'd actually begun to care about her, and now he'd gone and lost her...and it was all his fault.

He'd broken his word to protect her by trying to save everyone else. He'd done just as her family had, just passed her over while pretending like he was some kind of fucking hero.

Unless maybe she did make it after all...

He was still mentally beating himself up as he followed whatever paths he could find through the woods and back toward the highway. They'd never agreed on any kind of meeting place if the farmhouse was no longer safe, but he figured the car they'd left for Sophia was a good enough spot to start. A pair of tail lights swerving along the road ahead of him told him at least one other person had the same thought.

Within minutes, he was pulling up to find the rest of the group gathered exactly where he'd predicted, all greeting each other with relief, but there were still several missing. He had yet to see Shane, Andrea, the scrawny farmboy and Otis' old lady...

...and most importantly, Beth. He quickly scanned the group, checking and rechecking for her as Carol climbed off the back of his bike before he engaged the kickstand, a panicked fear clutching his heart when he didn't immediately find her standing with everyone else. He walked closer, unsure of what he would do if his worst suspicions were correct, when he finally saw her long, blonde ponytail peeking out from behind the beat up old blue pickup that T-Dog had been driving.

Her arms were wrapped around her middle, head hung so low her chin was on her chest; she supported herself against the bed of the truck. She looked up, eyes red-rimmed and glassy with tears, when she heard his breath rush out of his lungs. He could barely move and yet couldn't move fast enough to get to her; his usually steady tread faltered at the sight of her, whole and intact...and alone. She closed the distance between them, throwing herself against him and wrapping her slender arms around his waist, pulling herself tightly to him, fear and relief evident in her hold.

A swell of anger and one of relief battled their way through him. This girl, woman, had come to actually mean something to him, had worked her way into his heart in some capacity in just a few short weeks, and there was what was left of her family, her own flesh and blood, just standing, holding each other, ignoring her. Daryl glared at her father, who appeared to be a good man to all others but in reality could be lumped into the same group as his own considering how he treated his youngest child. The old man looked over the top of his oldest

daughter's head and only blinked at the two of them. He made no motion to see if Beth was alright, made no inquiries as to how she had survived.

What a horse's ass.

Gently, Daryl pushed Beth away to get a good look at her and noticed blood covering most of her arm and the front of her denim jacket, not to mention the exhausted look on her ashen face. "Shit, Beth, you bit?!" alarm clearly evident in his voice. Christ if she was...it would entirely be on him.

Beth looked up at him, confusion in her eyes, then looked down at herself in the early morning light. After a moment that lasted entirely too long, she shook her head, "It's not me...it must be...oh my God I shouldn't have let her go." Her breath was coming quicker now as a wave of panic washed over her features.

"Who, Beth?" Daryl pushed for an explanation, pulling her jacket away from her to make sure the blood was only on the outside of the garment.

"Patricia," Beth started to sob. "We were with Lori and Patricia was behind me and...they...she wouldn't let go and..." she trailed off as she fell back into his arms, her body wracked with sobs.

Daryl was in completely uncharted territory. Sure, Beth had been depending on him for survival, but this touchy-feely emotional shit was out of his league. Not knowing what else to do, he gently wrapped one arm around her shoulders and let his other hand cup her elbow before sliding up her arm and around her back. They both stood there, taking comfort in each other, leaving the rest of the group to debate and decide what to do next.

As far as he was concerned, they could all go straight to hell. He and Beth would probably be better off without them.

At least until the baby came. Daryl didn't have clue one as to how to take care of a kid, and Beth would only be going off what she read in the book she got. And that was just through the pregnancy. What was he supposed to do when it came time to have the kid? A whole new

fear trickled down his spine. His shoulders slumped when he realized she needed more than he could give her.

As if that was really any kind of surprise.

The other members of the group began piling into the few remaining vehicles and started a caravan down the highway. Slowly, almost reluctantly, Beth and Daryl climbed onto his motorcycle. He turned to talk over his shoulder before starting the engine, knowing he'd be able to catch up easily. "We goin' with 'em or what?" He'd let her choose and would go along with whatever she wanted. Girl didn't get many choices lately, so he figured it was the least he could do.

When she nodded, he nodded back, started the engine, and took off.

Chapter End Notes

A little shorter than other chapters, but if I kept going, I wouldn't be updating for...who knows how long.

Thank you for reading - please take a moment and leave a review!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Finally! I promised you all I wouldn't abandon any of my stories, it's just going to take me a while to get updates out to you. One of my New Year resolutions is to write at least thirty minutes every day, so hopefully that helps keep things going a little. Thanks for your patience. Without further ado, here we go!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

"At least we've got some spare clothes inside," Beth gave a small smile as she and Daryl huddled under the overhang of the tiny porch of the house they'd found. They'd been out on a hunt trying to find some fresh meat to go with yet another meal of canned vegetables when a sudden storm kicked up and drenched them through as they raced to get home.

The group had been bouncing from one neighborhood to another in search of a place to live that could compare to the Greenes' farm for weeks. So far, they'd found houses that had room enough for everyone, but no ready source of food. Autumn had settled in, so any backyard gardens had either been choked out by weeds, eaten over by rabbits and squirrels, or rotted away, everything left unchecked by the former caretakers, as they were most likely either dead or one of the walking dead. Everyone in their group would take a couple days scouring the neighborhood for anything they could use, namely food and clothing, gasoline where they could find it. Daryl and Beth had been going out as often as they could to try to catch any kind of animal that was out looking for its own meal.

He'd been taking Beth along with him everywhere he went lately. He damn sure wasn't leaving her behind with her supposed family anymore, and everyone else in the group was so consumed with taking care of themselves, he doubted they would pay any mind to Beth. The thought made him clench his teeth in anger so often the muscles in his jaw were starting to get sore.

Not that he minded having Beth with him. For one, she was picking up any and all inadvertent lessons he'd given her as they walked together, learning to track so well that he began letting her take the lead on their daily walks, only correcting her every now and then. For two, he had peace of mind when she was with him. He knew she was safe when she was with him, and as each day passed, that mattered more and more to him.

It was more than that, though. She had a calming presence about her, and he felt himself relax when he was with her, despite the tiny bump she was starting to show under her shirt, which had become about the only thing around that could make him a little nervous. The girl had such a small frame to begin with, any changes to her body because of the pregnancy were immediately noticeable.

Her belly wasn't the only part of her starting to become more pronounced. Daryl couldn't help but notice when her breasts were beginning to swell, just slightly. Looking at her now, with her shirt clinging to her where her jacket didn't cover her, he glanced down appreciatively to see the slightest hint of cleavage, even underneath the dingy fabric. They hadn't had sex since the farm, which was a month ago at least, not that he wasn't willing. The problem was, with being on the road so much, spending most of their days hunting for food or shelter, there weren't a ton of opportunities making themselves available, and even if the occasion arose, they were usually too wiped out to muster up any more energy to do anything about it. He'd thought about having a quickie out in the woods while they were out, away from everyone else, but the thought of being mid-act and having to stop because of a damn walker pushed the idea out of his head without fail.

Even he wasn't horny enough to put up with that shit.

Besides, he didn't really know if she could even have sex in her condition, and he wasn't about to show his ignorance by asking. Instead, he'd just wait until the situation presented itself and see how far he could get.

In the meantime, she'd kept her end of their deal by giving him hand jobs often enough. It got to the point where he wouldn't even have to ask anymore. They had a rotating schedule to keep watch at night, and Daryl would be on guard more often than not. When his shift was over, he'd slip into whichever room Beth was sleeping and curl up next to her. He was always sure to stay quiet, his silent tread just part of his natural gait, but she would wake up when he got to her without fail, blinking those blue eyes up at him in the moonlight and scooting herself over to make room for him in whatever bedding they had found. She would slide her pillow over to him and rest her own head on his chest and shoulder, her hand resting just above his heart. He never knew if she would start tracing indiscriminate patterns on his chest to try to help him or herself sleep, but it ended up having the same effect on him every time, and within minutes he would start to drift off to sleep.

And then there were those nights, every so often, when he would feel her grin against him as her hand sneaked down his torso, wriggling under his belt and waistband of his boxers to find him already hard for her.

He never questioned any of it. Never thought to ask if she wanted anything in return – surely she'd ask if she did. He never paid any mind to those sleeping near them – if they wanted to look, that was on them. Besides, it took just enough of the edge off his mind to help him get some rest before they had to face...whatever the next day would bring them. No sense looking a gift horse in the mouth.

Daryl shook his head now, bringing himself back to the moment on the porch, and scattered cold drops of rain around him, smirking when Beth gave a tiny shriek when some of them landed on her even though she was just as soaking wet as he was. He readjusted the string of squirrels and rabbits he had thrown over his shoulder, "C'mon. Let's get you inside."

After depositing their contribution to dinner in the kitchen sink (he sure as hell wasn't going to cook the damn things for everyone, too), he followed Beth to the small bedroom they had claimed. Shacking up with the pregnant girl had its benefits: no one would dare ask her to sleep on the floor, so they were currently sharing a bed. Granted, it was a twin bed (Rick,

Lori, and Carl had taken up the master bedroom), in a room decorated for a pre-teen boy, but it sure as hell beat any alternative he could come up with. At least this house was already empty, not like the last one, where they had to clear out the bodies of the young, growing family that had occupied it.

The memories of that house would probably plague him for a long damn time.

Beth brought him out of his thoughts, holding a fresh t-shirt out for him while starting to peel his vest off his shoulders. "We're gonna have to find you something warmer soon," she said softly, hanging the leather garment on the back of the doorknob before moving to lift the hem of his currently soaked shirt up his abdomen.

"Don' need no help," he grumbled, taking the dry shirt from her and switching them out so he was never showing too much skin at once. Despite being in her presence almost constantly for as long as they'd been together, he was still uneasy about being completely exposed like that, even to her.

Beth at least had the good nature to humor his modesty and turned around to give him his privacy. Once he was dry from the waist up, he glanced over at her just in time to see her wriggle out of her jeans, seemingly growing tighter each day. He immediately looked away, not through any sense of his own decency, but because he didn't need any ideas. He'd been having enough of them already.

Apparently, he hadn't moved his eyes quite fast enough. Beth giggled, bringing his attention right back to her to see a grin curling at the ends of her lips. "You okay over there?"

Now that her jacket was off, he could see just how hard her nipples were, practically poking through the thin fabric of her shirt. Her hips had filled out just slightly thanks to her pregnancy, making her curves even more enticing than before. And now here she was standing in her panties and a T-shirt that was hugging those new curves, but was still big enough to end up hitting mid-thigh on her.

Even though they'd been living in each other's pockets for the last couple months, Daryl was dumbstruck at the sight of her. There was nothing necessarily raunchy or revealing at all about the way she looked. It was her modesty that had him so captivated.

And then she collapsed.

Daryl's heart jumped into his throat as he rushed to her side. Thankfully she had caught herself on the edge of the bed, and maybe that was what she had meant to do all along, but damn if it hadn't scared him regardless. His mind started trying to wrap his brain around it all, what had made her collapse like she had. He always made sure she had food to eat, but he knew she wasn't getting what she needed.

What the baby needed. Their baby.

Jesus. The idea still shook him sometimes.

Beth let out a loud, if not a tad overdramatic, yawn. "Oh, god, Daryl, I'm just so tired." She scooted back further up the bed, sliding under the Nintendo themed covers, then pulled out her hair tie, fanning her blonde hair into a messy halo when she laid her head on the pillow. "I think I'm just gonna take a nap. Think anyone will mind?" she asked through a yawn as her eyes already started to drift shut.

Daryl was ready to tell them all to go straight to hell if anyone did mind, but he kept that to himself. Instead he straightened himself to stand, looked back at her once more (swearing to himself that it was just out of habit), and went to leave.

The doorknob was in his hand when she called to him softly, "Stay with me?" Not moving his hand, he turned to answer that he was going to do any number of things - check his bolts and bow, clean off a squirrel or two for them to eat tonight, see who was scheduled for watch that night - but the look on her face stopped all the excuses in the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat. She looked so sad, almost pitiful, her eyes pleading with him.

How the hell was he supposed to say no?

Daryl toed off his boots and crossed the room to join her on the bed. "Daryl," she stopped him before he could pull back the comforter. "Your pants are still wet."

He looked down, and sure enough, his pants were still soaked from the knee down, so much so that even his socks were now a little damp. He let his head fall back and focused on the ceiling as he unbuckled his belt and undid his pants, letting them fall to the floor. He picked them up, tossed them on the chair in the corner of the room, and crawled into the bed with Beth.

They immediately assumed their normal sleeping position, with her head resting on his shoulder and chest, his arm around her. He wasn't exactly tired, was just taking advantage of a damn good excuse to take a load off for a while, so he lay there awake, letting his thoughts drift. As they did, his fingers followed suit, trailing up and down her upper arm as her own hand rested over his heart.

Beth snuggled in, even closer to him than she had been, sliding her hand across his chest like she was pulling him into a one-armed hug, but wasn't squeezing. Next thing he knew, her lips were pressing against his neck, his jawline. When she started to nuzzle her way toward his earlobe, he pulled back and looked down at her questioningly, regretting it almost immediately when a deep blush crossed her cheeks. "What'cha doin, girl?" he asked, half teasingly, already pretty sure of what her answer would be.

Stammering, Beth struggled to get her answer out. "I...I just thought, since neither of us have anything to do...we could..."

"Do each other?" He chuckled at her reaction, which was to hide her face into his chest. "Thought you were tired."

"I am," she defended, "but...my hormones have been going absolutely crazy, and driving me crazy along with them."

Daryl moved onto his side, facing her, cringing as the springs of the mattress groaned under him. "Why didn't ya just say somethin'?"

Beth looked up at him from beneath her eyelashes, her hair falling forward to cover part of her face. "I've been trying to...hint at...things."

All those hand jobs. She was just asking for some attention and was still too damn shy to actually ask for it.

Didn't he feel like the asshole?

"You sure we can?" If she was willing to go out on a limb and ask for sex, he was finally willing to show his ignorance.

Nodding, Beth explained, "The book said it's okay. Well, as long as my doctor said it was, but since I don't really *have* one..." She looked up at him again, "Maybe we just...be careful? Take it slow?"

The irony of her asking him to be careful now was not lost on him, but he at least had the good sense not to mention it. Instead he tucked her hair back behind her ear and pressed his lips to hers. Her fingers worked their way up his chest, his neck, into his hair to pull him with her as she lay back on the pillow so he was half covering her.

The bed creaked beneath them again, this time much louder than before, making both of them pull apart immediately. Beth dropped her head on the pillow with a growl of a groan, heavy with frustration. "Nah," Daryl growled, "we ain't stoppin' now."

"But...they'll hear us," she said, her eyes glassy with tears.

"They hear Maggie an' Glenn all the damn time," Daryl argued then relented with a sigh. "C'mere," he pulled back to kneel before her, holding his hand out for her to take. He helped her off the bed, then quickly pulled the comforter off and spread it on the floor, the pillow following right after. He knelt again, helping her to the floor, grateful for the plush carpet beneath them rather than the hardwood that was in most of the rest of the house.

When she had settled, he lay next to her, running his hand along her side, tracing her curves down to her hip. She reached up for him, her fingers tracing along his arm, his shoulder, before curling into his hair and pulling him down to her.

It had been a while - weeks, in fact - since he'd kissed her. He'd damn near forgotten what it felt like to get lost in the sweetness of her mouth, to hear her soft moans filling his ears. Resting most of his weight on his elbow, making sure not to crush her, Daryl brought his other hand to her chest, anxious to feel her tits in his hand. When they were together on the farm, she had asked him to be gentle with them, that they were sensitive and painful, but based on her reaction now, the way she arched into his palm, he figured that stage had passed. Her nipple hardened beneath the fabric of her shirt as he rubbed his thumb back and forth against it. Suddenly it wasn't enough. Daryl struggled to find the hem of her shirt and work his hand underneath it to feel her soft skin beneath his own rough palm.

He smiled against her mouth as she let go a low moan when he found her again. Maybe she wouldn't mind a little more of his weight on top of her, after all.

"Daryl," she whispered against his lips, and he pulled back immediately, afraid he'd been wrong and he'd hurt her. "Touch me."

As far as he could remember, he'd never heard her be so direct when they were together like this. If he had the brain function to think about it in the moment, Daryl would realize that of all the times he'd been with some chick who started giving him orders, he'd *never* been as turned on by it as he was right now. Something about that sweet voice telling him to do something dirty like that...damn. He'd be an idiot to ignore her.

After a final squeeze, one last tease of her nipple, he ventured south, sliding his fingers under the waistband of her panties. "Christ, girl," he fought to whisper, "you're fuckin' soaked."

"I..." she gasped as he slid his fingers into her, "oh, God, Daryl..." Her breath caught in her throat as she fought back a moan trying to claw its way out. "It's like this all the time. I'm always...oh God!"

Daryl kissed her, his fingers curling into her to find that magical spot, until her pussy clamped down around his fingers and he swallowed the moans she couldn't contain any longer. She started coming down from her high, stealing kisses from him as her breathing returned to, well, not normal, but significantly slower. Her hips still ground against him, seeking more, and he couldn't help but grin against her. "All the time, huh? Not just me?" he teased.

Beth pulled back to look him in the eye. "I didn't say that," she whispered before pulling him down for another kiss. "I want you."

He grinned down at her, "Yes, ma'am."

.oOo.

Daryl pulled himself to his feet, stifling his groan that would expose just how much older he was than she. He was just grateful his knees didn't crack as he stood up. He paused just a second to let his back stretch out before holding his hand to help Beth off the floor, too. They both started getting dressed, though Daryl's pants were still wet and he just didn't have the energy to find dry ones just yet. He noticed Beth didn't bother with pants either, saying with a smile that she still wanted to take a nap now that she was relaxed, and he couldn't blame her if in the least.

They lay together on the bed, covered with the light comforter he'd retrieved from the floor, taking up their usual position with her head resting on his chest and shoulder. Beth seemed to be cuddling into him more than usual, even going so far as to hook her knee over his thigh. It was more than just not having room on the pillow to share. She was holding him, relaxing into him. Like she...wanted to be there with him.

He wasn't quite sure what to make of that, but damn if it didn't make him want to hold her a little closer, too.

"Daryl?" Beth spoke softly, and he hummed in reply. "Do you...can we...do that again?" Her fingers played along his chest like she liked to do, but he could still feel her nervousness trickling through her.

Why the hell was she nervous?

Daryl tried to make light of her question with a chuckle, "You gotta gimme a minute to recharge, but..."

Beth lifted her head to look at him, a grin curling the ends of her mouth upward. "Not *now*," she replied, rolling her eyes, "but...more than we have been?"

"Hell yeah, he responded without even pretending to think about it. No way was he going to pass up being with her any time she wanted, no matter what reason she gave him. "You just say the word, girl."

His answer seemed to bring her some kind of relief - as if she thought he might say no. She relaxed into his chest again, and his mind started to wander. Did she really think he'd say no to sex with her? Did she really think he was that mean? Was she still afraid of him after all this time they'd spent together? Maybe all those hand jobs he'd greedily accepted without reciprocation had her feeling like he didn't want her.

He wasn't exactly sure he liked that feeling. In fact, he was pretty sure that made him feel pretty shitty. Why the hell did she think he brought her along on hunts? Because he had to? Didn't she get that he liked having her with him, even if nothing physical happened between them?

His thoughts and emotions tore through him as he lay there with her, her breath slowing as she fell asleep with her hand over his heart. She looked peaceful - damn near angelic - and a wave of guilt surged through him.

Daryl would be the first to tell anyone that he was a redneck asshole, much like his brother, and most days he couldn't give two shits about what anyone thought of that. But now, looking at this girl, this woman, and realizing what he'd done to her, what he'd put her through, he felt downright ashamed of himself. He'd all but threatened her, fucked with her head, tricking her into having sex with him, stealing her virginity. He was so damn careless, only worried about getting a piece of ass, that he'd gone and knocked her up, which had ended up alienating her from her family. He'd taken everything from her, only promising food and safety, which in all honesty he couldn't really guarantee, not in this world. Game was getting more and more scarce as winter took over, and any cans of food they'd found in this neighborhood would only last for so long before they'd have to scavenge further out to find more. And he damn well knew what they did find wasn't ideal, wasn't enough for her and the baby to stay healthy.

Beth deserved better. Better than he could ever give her. And she was stuck with him.

He needed to get out, the urge to run overwhelming him. Daryl slid out from under her as carefully as he could, making sure to tuck her in and that she was fast asleep before stepping into his now damp and cold pants, throwing on his vest, and rushing through the house, not stopping until the cold air hit his face and filled his lungs. He held onto the flimsy aluminum

railing on the porch that wobbled as he let it hold more of his weight. He really wanted to storm through the woods, kill something, punch a tree, something to keep this feeling of inadequacy from taking over.

And just what would that prove? That he was the piece of shit he felt like right now.

The screen door squeaked behind him. Great. Just what he needed: company.

Misery loves company - that's what they always said, right?

"Nice day, huh?" a voice came from behind him, though he had to look over his shoulder to confirm that it was Hershel joining him on the porch. It's not like they had much to talk about in the month they'd been on the road. The older man moved so he was even with Daryl at the railing, but making sure there was a decent amount of space between them. "Thanks for dinner. Carol's making the squirrels into some kind of stew. Should stick to our ribs a little."

Pulling himself from his self-loathing long enough to see through the crap, Daryl spoke up. "You can cut the small talk, ol' man. The hell you want?"

Hershel chuckled. *Chuckled*. He answered before Daryl had much of a chance to work himself up into fighting mode. "I want to thank you for taking care of Bethy when I couldn't. When I found out about her," he paused and took a breath as he searched for the right word, "condition, I let my emotions control my actions." Daryl saw him hang his head out of the corner of his eye. "She never said it was you. Just that a man had promised to protect her if she..." Hershel turned to face him. "I thought it was Shane, and I found out about Bethy just two days after what he did to my family...all those in the barn..." Daryl could practically feel the man's blood pressure rising at the memories. "I made an assumption that I shouldn't have, and I regret it."

"Need ta be tellin' her this," Daryl mumbled, wishing for a cigarette. He wasn't used to all this emotional shit.

Hershel nodded solemnly, "I'm working on that." He turned back toward the door, pausing before opening it and turned to face Daryl again, his hand still on the handle. "I can't say I'm happy about what's happened, that I'm going to be a grandfather at the end of the world, but I'm glad she has you to watch out for her. You're probably the most capable out of all of us. If anyone can ensure her survival, it's you." With those words lingering in Daryl's ears, Hershel left him to dwell on their brief conversation.

Well, shit, just go ahead and twist the knife a little deeper, why don't ya?

Daryl let out a heavy sigh as he watched the rain. He had to prove himself wrong on this one. He wouldn't leave her. Beth deserved better, so he'd be better. He didn't have any idea as to how to make that happen, but he was bound and determined to figure it out.

Thanks for reading - please leave a comment!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

After another day or so, the group had gone through all the houses in their current neighborhood, and the surrounding neighborhoods, taking anything and everything they could use. It was on the last run that Glenn and Maggie had come back out of breath and empty handed, telling everyone that a herd - at least a couple hundred strong - was on its way. It was quickly agreed that they couldn't risk staying in the house with the limited supplies they had, so they might as well move now before the walkers got too close. It wasn't like they'd planned on staying much longer anyway as their food was all but gone already.

Everyone packed up what they had and took off in their caravan, searching for their next home. Beth clung to Daryl on the back of his motorcycle, hoping the next place they found would be a place they could stay for longer than a week at a time. They'd lost count of the days long ago, but by her count, they were towards the end of October by now, maybe even into November. That would put her roughly three months into her pregnancy.

It was looking like a long winter ahead of them. No permanent home, no ready food source, just going from place to place, staying until all resources were gone, and moving again. It reminded her of *Independence Day*, when the president discovered and revealed that the aliens were like locusts, going from planet to planet. She remembered it being Shawn's favorite movie for the longest time, watching it almost daily when it came out on video, and again when it was re-released on DVD. Her thoughts traveled to before the world ended, watching movies with Shawn while Daddy snoozed in his armchair and Mama sat in her recliner doing embroidery or crocheting, Maggie off at some party. Her memories, paired with her anxiety about the coming months, hit hard and suddenly, causing her to tear up.

God, what would they think of her now? Her mama had always called her "My brave Bethy-girl." Shawn had told her once that he was so protective of her only because she was younger, not because she actually needed protecting. Now here she was, practically helpless, cut off from her family despite living with them and, literally, clinging to her only means of safety and security in the man that had taken advantage of her.

She was too afraid to let go of Daryl to wipe her eyes, so she just held tight to him and sobbed into his back. Beth didn't realize he could actually feel her crying against him until she felt the motorcycle start to slow down.

Daryl pulled over, waving the rest of the group to go on ahead of them. Beth tried to pull herself together, breathing deeply and quickly wiping the tears from her cheeks now that they'd stopped. She made sure to keep her head down when Daryl looked over his shoulder, "You okay?"

"Yeah," she nodded, still not ready to make eye contact with him. "Just hormones. I'm...I'm fine."

She felt him scoff out a laugh and shake his head. “Bullshit. C’mon...off,” he jerked his head to the side, and Beth followed his directions, swinging her leg over to stand next to him. He was standing in front of her soon after, the corner of his thumbnail firmly embedded between his teeth, a sign she’d come to recognize to mean he was deep in thought and unsure of how to say what he wanted.

Beth sighed, wiping more tears away before saving him the effort. “It’s just...everything hit all at once. I miss my family, my home, where are we going to end up next, where will we be when I have this baby, how are we going to survive with a baby crying...” she stopped to catch and control her breath before she started sobbing again. “I’m sorry, Daryl. I’m sorry you’re stuck with me and my hormones making me all kinds of crazy.”

Daryl only stared at her, chewing on the inside of his lip now, before watching his foot kick at some loose gravel on the side of the road. “Ain’t yer fault,” he mumbled at her. After a moment, he looked up at her again, and the hardness that was usually there in his eyes...wasn’t. There was some other emotion there - was it guilt? Compassion? Whatever it was, it had been showing up more and more in the past few days, and Beth wasn’t sure what to make of it yet.

She stepped closer to him, now unable to tear her eyes away from his, and half expected him to take a step back and was relieved when he stayed his ground, even when she slid her arms around his waist until she could rest her head on his chest. They stood like that for a moment, with her taking what little support Daryl gave her while she tried to regain control of her breathing after crying again. She nearly sagged in relief when his arms finally wrapped around her shoulders, his chin resting on the crown of her head.

“I wish I knew, girl. Wish I fuckin’ knew.”

Beth pulled back and looked up at him to give him a watery smile. “Something will turn up. Right? I mean, it has to.” She breathed out, almost laughing at her own hopefulness. “We should probably get going, catch up with everyone.”

Daryl scoffed again, “Damn fools’re prob’ly lost already anyway.” She smiled up at him, glad to see him smirk back at her. He released her from his arms slowly, as if he didn’t really want to let her go, and climbed back onto his bike, holding out his hand for her to keep her balance as she followed suit. Once she was settled behind him again, he looked back over his shoulder, “Gotta get you some decent gloves. Yer hands’re freezing.”

There were a million other things they needed that should have been a higher priority, all matter of baby products included, and she could survive with cold hands, but there was something in his tone that told her this had just been put to the top of his list. It was something he could do for her to bring her some comfort, and that warmed her heart. She grinned and tightened her arms around him as he started and revved the engine before taking off to find the rest of their group.

The group had found their latest temporary home at a no-tell-motel on the edge of town with an overgrown cornfield across the street and acres of forest behind the building. Daryl insisted Beth stay in the van with Lori and Carl while he went with most of the rest of the group to make sure the area was clear of anyone living or dead. After a short while, Carl decided he just couldn't hold it anymore, so Lori went with him to watch his back while he did his business. Beth leaned back against the headrest and closed her eyes, hoping for even a two-minute nap, when the driver side door opened. "That was fast," she said without opening her eyes.

A deep chuckle sounded from next to her, "Actually, I should have come to you weeks ago."

"Daddy!" Beth was more than surprised to see him sitting next to her. It wasn't like they'd never seen each other in the several weeks they'd been on the road, and they'd even exchanged brief greetings every now and again, but never anything more than a hello-how-are-you type of conversation. Suffice it to say that Beth was pretty surprised that her father was now sitting next to her. From the look on his face, she figured he wanted to talk.

Hershel let out a heavy sigh, his head hanging so low his chin rested on his chest. "I have behaved wrongly, Bethy." After a moment of tense silence filling the space between them, he looked up to meet her eyes. Beth was taken aback by the sadness she found there, but stayed quiet, letting him take his time to get what he wanted to say out. It's not like she had anything prepared to tell him, anyway. The way he'd pushed her out of his life all those weeks ago had seemed pretty final, and while she hoped for a reconciliation with him, she certainly hadn't expected it to happen.

"I still don't approve of what happened between you and Daryl. The thought of my unwed, eighteen-year-old daughter already..." he paused, taking a deep breath before continuing, "it's not right. It shouldn't have happened, for a lot of reasons that I won't go into right now." Beth pulled her gaze away from him, staring down at her hands in her lap, at the slight swell of her lower abdomen they were resting against, and blinked back the tears threatening to fall.

"But it did happen, and there's nothing I can do about it, and even though it took me a while, I've accepted that fact." She heard him take a shuddering breath. When Beth looked at him again, she saw his own eyes were glassy with tears. "I'm sorry for pushing you away, Bethy. I realize now that however upset or scared I may have been, it had to have been worse for you, and when you needed your family, I forced you out, and I'm so sorry for that."

There was no stopping the tears rolling down her face at that point, but before she could do anything more than wipe them away, Lori and Carl had returned. After a second's pause, Beth decided she didn't care if they had an audience. It had been breaking her heart several times over to not be with her family. Now, at least, there could be some healing.

Beth twisted in her seat, raising the arm rest before leaning over and wrapping her arms around her father's neck. No more words were needed. Not now, anyway. The feel of her Daddy's warm, heavy hand on her back was enough. Her heart felt lighter than it had in two months, and was ready to soar when, instead of leaving now that he'd apologized to go back to the truck with Maggie, Hershel stayed with her. Just his presence spoke volumes.

Not long after, Rick and Daryl approached the van. “Looks like the coast is clear,” Rick said with a grin. “No power or water, of course, but the main office was unlocked, so we found all the room keys. Figure it’ll be nice for everyone to get their own bed and a little privacy for a while. We’ll get everyone settled tonight and go through everything when it’s lighter outside.”

Hershel gave Beth’s knee a pat and a squeeze and opened the driver’s side door, nodding to Daryl as he left. Beth looked over her shoulder, still all happy tears and smiles, but her heart sank when what she saw was Daryl’s back as he walked away without her. She scrambled to grab her backpack and get out of the van, all but pushing Rick out of the way to chase after Daryl. She was sure he could hear her, with her boots hitting the pavement as heavily as they were and her shallow breaths catching in her throat as she moved as quickly as she felt comfortable doing. “Daryl!” she called to him as loudly as she dared, her voice thick with worry. Her mind raced to find a reason he would just leave her behind like he had.

When she finally caught up with him, she tried to lay her hand on his arm to bring herself to even with him, only for him to shrug out of her grasp right away before turning on her. “The hell you want from me, girl?”

She could only blink up at him, confused as to where this anger was coming from. “Wh...why...where are you going?”

“The fuck’s it matter?” he grunted out, turning to continue on to the motel room he’d picked out. “You an’ yer daddy’re all good now, right? Gonna be one big happy family again, just what ya wanted,” he spat out as he stormed away from her.

His telltale thumb between his teeth did not escape Beth, which only added to her confusion. She thought Daryl was only staying with her out of some sense of obligation or guilt or... Did he actually *want* to be with her? She rushed to catch up with him, racing in front of him before turning to stop him in his tracks. “I...I’m not gonna leave you,” she said, shaking her head for emphasis and wishing he would just look at her to see how serious she was. When he didn’t respond, not even to look at her, Beth worried that she’d misinterpreted his demeanor. “I mean, unless you want me to,” she whispered, half afraid of his answer.

Daryl’s eyes shot up, a trace of worry and sadness in them. Wounded. “That what ya think of me?” he asked in a hushed, hurt sounding voice until his features schooled themselves into their usual non-committal air. He shook his head, snapping himself back into his old self. “That what ya want?” he snorted at her before taking a side step around her to walk toward one of the rooms, “Think yer daddy can take care of you?”

It was in those words, that snarky (and essentially needless) attempt at insulting someone else to make himself out to be the better man, Beth realized two things. The first was that he was absolutely right about her father. It wasn’t even that he’d pushed her away, been so harsh with his reaction to her being pregnant. He had apologized, and if she were honest, Beth had forgiven him long before he’d joined her in that van just moments ago. It wasn’t in her nature to hold a grudge, and she certainly wasn’t about to start with holding one against her father. But, as Daryl pointed out, this man, the one she’d always looked up to, who’d always provided her with anything she needed, was no longer the one to take care of her. Hershel was no longer the leader of his family. He depended on Rick’s decisions to keep them all safe

and Daryl and his crossbow to keep them fed with fresh meat when the cans of food ran out. Beth was sure that he would if he could, but Hershel simply couldn't provide for her or for anyone else. Not in this world.

The second realization was that she'd been right all along. Despite his gruff exterior and surly demeanor, she was learning to see right through him - Daryl wanted her to stay with him, for one reason or another, and she had an inkling that it wasn't just because of any physical connection they had. If it was, he'd just keep making comments about her keeping her end of the deal or something along those lines. This was different. He *wanted* her with him, and this was his way of trying to show her just that, which must have been why he felt the need to make everyone else appear inferior to him, like someone who's lashing out at those around them stemmed from their own insecurities. He couldn't just come right out and say it. His pride would never allow for that. He thought she needed that reminder that she depended on him to keep her alive, whether or not it was true. Not only did he want her, he wanted her to need him.

As messed up as it was, even though she recognized that Daryl had some serious issues to work through (and she was pretty sure it all came from the same issues that gave him the scars that littered his back), she felt a wave of emotions swell within her heart at the idea of him wanting her to stay. With him. *With him* with him. He'd never outright tell her, but she was certain of it.

If only he knew how little he really needed to prove that point...how much he'd already proven it. Beth knew that in their world, it was survival of the fittest, and while the group at large supported each other and made sure no one went without, there was no question that Daryl made sure she was taken care of before anyone else anytime he could help it. He rarely left her side, usually taking her with him when he went hunting, teaching her what he could, and when he deemed a situation too dangerous, she was always paired with someone he'd come to trust.

But it was more than just him protecting and providing for her. Beth thought back to the moment on the side of the road, weeks before, when he'd noticed she'd been upset even over the rumble of the motorcycle's engine and pulled over, if not to comfort her, to at least help her to calm down. His current behavior might say otherwise, but she knew, deep down, that Daryl cared for her.

Her fingers warm in her gloves, hiding in the pockets of her new, heavier coat, proved it.

Beth bit back a grin as she followed him to the room, even more so when he stopped her before entering so he could check inside once more, regardless of the fact that he had undoubtedly checked it when they'd first found this place. Once he was satisfied for her safety, he held the door open for her, locking the door behind her then pulled the curtains open to let the last remaining light of the day peek through the filthy windows.

Beth plopped herself on the musty bed, motes of dust, so large she could see them even in the dim light, swirled into the air around her. She pulled off the gloves Daryl had found for her all those weeks ago before shrugging off her backpack and pulling it into her lap, taking out the bottle of water and a pack of stale crackers left over from the night they'd spent in a convenience store earlier that week. After nibbling on one, she held the plastic sleeve out to a

pacing Daryl, offering him something to tide him over until their next meal. Eventually he stopped moving and took her up on her offer, dropping onto the mattress next to her with a heavy sigh, sending more dust to spiral in the dim light. Together, they sat in near silence, the only sound filling the space being their munching on their simple meal. When half the sleeve was eaten, Beth carefully packed it back into her bag and pulled out a package of trail mix for them to share, deciding to make this their dinner rather than just a snack.

When she couldn't stand just sitting and staring at the wall in silence anymore, she suggested they turn in, get some sleep now so they could leave early in the morning to try to go hunting for some fresh food. Daryl nodded, then set to pushing the rickety table against the door and pulling the TV from its place on the dresser to shove into the corner by the door, adding what little extra security he could even beyond the deadbolt. Beth's heart squeezed an extra beat as she watched him show just how seriously he took his role as her protector. As he went to close the curtains again, plunging them into near darkness, she carefully pulled back the bed spread (any more dust in the air and she was sure she'd never get to sleep with all the coughing and sneezing she was sure to do). She turned down the bed for them both then began to undress before crawling between the sheets. When her jeans were folded and sitting on the floor next to her boots and her coat was spread on top of the blankets as another layer of warmth for when she slept, she looked up to see Daryl staring at her from his side of the bed.

"He's really growin' in there, huh?" he asked softly.

Beth wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. Instead she just smiled and rested a hand on her belly, which had grown big enough that her pants were getting more and more uncomfortable to wear. She hated asking for anything when there was so much they needed, but she wasn't sure how much longer she could keep wearing the clothes she had. Deciding to wait for another day to bring it up, she crawled into the bed, snuggling into the pillow and watching Daryl toe off his own boots and undo his belt and the button of his pants before joining her.

It was the first bed they'd had that was actually big enough for the both of them, not having to squeeze onto a little twin bed, and yet they still met in the middle, whether by habit or a newfound necessity. On nights when he had guard duty, it was difficult for Beth to have any restful sleep. She found she needed Daryl there with her in order to really relax and succumb to sleep.

Daryl opened his arm toward her, still laying flat on his back, and Beth found her spot curled into his chest, her head resting on his shoulder rather than the pillow. After everything they'd been through in the past four short months, Beth realized any awkwardness between them had completely vanished. Somewhere deep in the back of her mind was a voice telling her to stop letting herself get so attached to him, reminding her of all the things he'd tricked her into doing...but the voice in her heart spoke louder, drowning it out. This was the man who had saved her life multiple times, who took care of her when she couldn't do for herself. Who, when her family had ostracized her, was still there, still took her in, even with the burden of their new joint responsibility. This man that was teaching her to survive, to track and hunt and fight. There might not be love between them, but there was something...something more than friendship. Daryl made her feel safe and wanted, and that was enough for now.

“So what makes you think it’s a boy?” she asked as she relaxed further into him and he let himself sink a little more into the mattress beneath them.

Daryl snorted and shook his head. Beth could swear she could feel him grin against the top of her head. “Dunno. Just figured...” he trailed off. She raised her head to look up at him, prompting him to continue. After releasing a weighted sigh, he went on, “Figured the universe is hell-bent on kicking my ass. Might as well gimme an ornery little shit like I was when I was little to deal with.”

Beth blinked back at him, torn between smiling in agreement and frowning at his crassness. “There are so many things wrong with that, I’m not even sure where to begin.” She scooted up to lean against the headboard, shoving a pillow behind her lower back, giving her support she didn’t realize she needed until that moment. “First of all, no child of mine will be an ornery little...shit.” Daryl looked up at her, but stayed where he was, his head near her thigh now that she was sitting up. “Second, girls can be just as ornery as boys,” she gave him a pointed look, and he snorted a half a laugh in return. “And third, I bet you were a sweet kid to start out with. You can’t always have been this...”

Now Daryl propped himself up on his elbow to look directly at her. “Been this what?” he asked, anger threatening the edges of his question.

She looked back at him with wide eyes as she frantically reached for an answer that wouldn’t upset him. She wanted to tell him that, yes, he could be downright ornery, but she’d never say that to his face. “This much of a...badass,” she said, feeling the blush rushing to cover her cheeks. Daryl apparently decided there wasn’t anything to fight over; she felt him relax into the pillow again, this time on his side, his breath warm against her thigh, sending all kinds of tingles coursing through her.

Some rather adult-themed thoughts started to form in her head, but one look at Daryl beside her had them scattering to the back of her mind. He looked absolutely exhausted. Not only was he spending most of the day tracking animals to hunt and bring back for the rest of them to eat, but took his turn being on watch at night as well. She wondered how he could function on such little amounts of sleep.

The irony was not lost on her when she realized in a few short months, she’d be the one barely sleeping, staying up all hours of the night with a newborn. She wondered if Daryl would help take care of their baby. She couldn’t exactly picture him changing diapers or burping...or even feeding a baby. Her heart sank a little as she concluded she’d basically be a single parent, but managed to hope that her father, maybe even her sister, might step in sometimes to help. She knew she probably wouldn’t be depending on anyone else for help. They all had jobs to do, and this baby was about to become her number one priority.

As she thought, she let her fingers drag through Daryl’s hair and grinned when he practically purred at the sensation. It had gotten a little longer since they’d first met, and she thought it looked good on him. Really good. Her hormones flared again and she had to talk herself out of waking him up for sex.

There was always tomorrow morning.

His eyes had closed as their conversation had ended, his breathing evened out into a steady, lazy rhythm still ghosting over her bare thigh. As gently as she could, Beth scooted back down to lay beside him, careful not to disturb him. Her fingers itched to play with his hair again, to touch his face while it looked so peaceful, or even graze along his bicep, but decided against it, not wanting to wake him. The man rarely slept as it was, so far be it from her to be the one to pull him from his slumber without a damn good reason.

Beth breathed deeply, trying to calm herself down enough to find some sleep herself, and smoothed her shirt over her belly, rubbing little circles around her belly button as she wondered if Daryl was right - if they would have a bouncing baby boy or girl. Would they have their hands full with a little hellion, or would this be an easy baby like her mother had told her she had been? Somewhere between ideas for baby names, she finally drifted off.

.oOo.

Beth blinked herself awake. She lay on her back, taking in her surroundings to help her recall where exactly she was. Slowly her brain put the pieces together and she remembered they had bounced around the countryside again and had found a farmhouse big enough to hold everyone comfortably. It had all the creaks and groans of her childhood home, but the layout was nothing like the one she'd grown up with, which gave her all kinds of mixed feelings about staying there. Her father seemed to be more quiet than usual, so she knew she wasn't the only one feeling this way.

Maggie still had yet to speak to her. Beth hated this long-lasting silence between her and her sister, and certainly didn't hold any kind of grudge against her...at least not anymore. She knew her sister, though, and knew that it was only a matter of time before Maggie would come around, but it had to be on her time. Besides, it wasn't like they had a ton of opportunities to talk lately. Beth was often tagging along and learning from Daryl while he hunted while Maggie and Glenn were usually the ones to go from house to house in whatever neighborhood they ended up in to look for other supplies. When they were on the move, Beth and Maggie were always in separate cars (when Beth wasn't riding on the back of Daryl's bike); when they were all together, Daryl stayed by her side, his very presence warding off any attempts at anyone coming close to her. Still, Maggie knew where to find her, and Beth had nothing to apologize for and wasn't about to go to her sister looking for any kind of apology or sympathy, so any conversation that happened would have to be started by Maggie.

It had been another couple weeks since the hotel. In that time, Daryl had found a pair of sweats (without her asking for them, much to her happiness) that fit much more comfortably around her ever-growing belly, which had seemingly doubled in size practically overnight. By her count she was getting close to five months along, just about halfway through her pregnancy.

That also meant they were close to Christmas time, if that even meant anything anymore. She still believed in God, believed that he would never truly desert them, and while Christmas had always been her favorite holiday, she'd been sad to find herself completely without any Christmas spirit, even knowing that it wasn't about exchanging gifts and pretty decorations, or even having a ham dinner with all the trimmings, but more about being with those she

loved. They were all lucky to at least be surrounded by others that cared for them, even without all the merriness of the Christmas season.

She knew it was silly. With everything going on, running for their lives and fighting the dead, no one really had the time to think of anything about Christmas. Still, her heart was heavy. So heavy that apparently Daryl noticed, not that she was surprised. There were few things about her Daryl didn't notice. He'd even gone so far as to ask her, "Why the hell you sighing all the damn time?" and didn't outright mock her when she told him.

As she lay in the double bed, curled under layers of blankets and missing Daryl's warmth, she felt her stomach gurgle. She said a silent prayer of thanks that her morning sickness had subsided, then realized...

...where was Daryl?

It was very unlike him to just take off without her, especially lately. Beth had become almost as good as he was at tracking animals, and had started learning how to fire his crossbow. She was beyond surprised he'd even suggested letting her touch it, let alone use it, but he reasoned she might as well since she was out with him all the time. She had yet to make her first kill while hunting, but her aim was getting better each time they went out.

So why hadn't he woken her when he left? He'd been assigned to guard duty the night before - she vaguely remembered him crawling into the bed behind her and wrapping an arm around her before they both found sleep again - and by the feel of the cold pillow beside her, he'd been gone for at least an hour. Once she'd dressed and went to the kitchen for a meager breakfast, she learned no one else had seen him aside from T-Dog who had relieved him of his post sometime around midnight.

And it wasn't like Beth had slept the morning away. She finished her stale cereal and fruit cocktail breakfast before the sun had risen much higher than the horizon. If he hadn't returned by noon, then she would worry.

Her stomach gurgled again. She didn't think much of it, figuring it was a symptom of a sugary meal combined with stressing over where Daryl had gotten himself to. Not that she was worried that he couldn't handle himself. She was just...concerned.

She missed him.

Deciding to find something to keep herself busy, she joined Lori and Carol in sorting through clothes and blankets and everything else they'd been collecting over the past months and deciding what was worth keeping and what could probably be replaced in favor of something more durable or warmer to help guarantee their survival through the winter. Once her plastic tub was full of folded clothes and the lid had been wrangled onto it, barely holding on around the bulging sides, she stood up to push it over to the front door, ready to be taken out to the trucks.

"Hang on," someone called out. Beth looked around, startled out of the task at hand, to see Glenn walking quickly from the hall. "I'll move it. Don't worry about it," he explained with a grin. Beth could hear his unspoken words, that she shouldn't be trying to move anything so

heavy in her condition. She smiled her thanks back at him, and looked up to see Maggie standing in the doorway, her arms folded over her middle with a strange expression on her face. Before she could say anything, Lori snapped the lid onto her own plastic tub, and Maggie rushed to offer to carry it out with Glenn.

Beth tried not to get too upset. It wasn't like Maggie was going to start any kind of conversation in front of so many people. Still, offering to help her own sister instead of Lori would have been a nice start.

She felt another gurgle in her belly. A glance out the window told her it was close to noon, and there was still no sign of Daryl, so she chalked it all up to being worried over him and stressed about Maggie. She wandered back into the kitchen to scrounge for something to tide her over until dinner and decided to lay back down.

She hadn't intended to fall asleep, but must have done so because she woke up to the sound of excited voices from down the hallway. Beth fixed her ponytail and gave herself a once over in the mirror before stepping into the hall, tiptoeing toward the kitchen to find a very uncomfortable looking Daryl surrounded by most of their group. Hershel and Carol were heading into the garage, calling over their shoulders that they'd try to be quick and get something going for everyone.

Beth stood in the entryway to the kitchen, not even trying to keep the confusion off her face. Daryl, having seen her, pushed his way through the group, still being congratulated and thanked, all the way to her. "Daryl...what's going on?" she managed to ask. She didn't want to appear nagging by asking him where he'd been and why he hadn't taken her with him.

He looked to his feet, arms hanging at his sides, as he spoke quietly, "Went huntin'." The look on Beth's face must have told him she'd already figured that part, so he continued, "got a wil' boar. Was a bitch ta take down, had some...issues...gettin' it back here for ya."

She was certain there was a blush crossing his cheeks that had nothing to do with him spending the day in the cold. "For me?" she repeated. Daryl only nodded in response, his gaze still focused on his shoes. The wheels in her mind churned for an answer and she gasped when she found it. "A ham dinner?" she whispered, tears pricking her eyes when he nodded again. "Daryl..." she started to stay, stepping into him to wrap her arms around him, but he held her back at arm's length. "What?"

"Like I said, issues," was his only explanation. She took another step back and looked him over, trying to understand, when she noticed his already dark clothes were somehow shiny in the weak light filtering in through the kitchen window.

"Daryl..." her voice was hardly above a whisper, "is that blood? Is it yours?"

He shook his head. "Damn pig squealing attracted a couple walkers. 'M fine, though."

Another look at him proved him right. There were no tears in any of his clothes, and all the stains on his clothes were too dark to be fresh blood, which meant it was the decaying blood of a walker.

At that point, in that moment, she didn't care that he was practically covered in gore. She didn't care that they had an audience. All she cared about was that Daryl was back and safe and whole. She wrapped her arms around him, not caring about the dark smudges that were sure to smear across her cheek as she pressed it to his chest. "Thank you, Daryl. Thank you so much."

Her heart soared when she felt him tentatively return her hug. She smiled against him before looking up into his face, then pulled back gently and took his hand to guide him back to the room they'd been sleeping in.

Although, once she got him out of his filthy clothes, they certainly wouldn't be doing much sleeping before dinner was prepared.

Chapter End Notes

I think that's gonna be where we cut it for now. I know there were quite a few time jumps in this chapter (just like watching the show, right? ha!), but the next chapter will pick up right where we left off, so there's something to look forward to, right?

Thanks to all who have stuck around while I kicked my muse into gear and finally got this chapter out. I wish the stars would align more for me, but finding time, energy, and inspiration all at once is rare indeed. I'm going to try and get back to writing a little bit every day, but with summer break upon us (meaning I'm home with my own kids instead of at school) and trying to find a bigger house to move into, I can't exactly promise that. What I can promise is that I will not leave any of my stories unfinished.

Speaking of, I may be taking a break from this story and work on one of my other WIPs (Summer of Learning, Man in Black, Lady in Red). This story is just so heavy...I need to write some fluff. This chapter you just read is about the fluffiest this story has seen since it began. So. There's that.

Thank you again for all your patience and support. I appreciate it 100%!

Chapter 15: Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Food is scarce in the middle of the first winter of the zombie apocalypse, forcing Beth and Daryl to venture further and further to find food for the rest of the group. They run into an unsavory group, and the two of them find themselves outnumbered. Warnings for show-level violence and threats of nonconsensual sex.

Chapter Notes

I live!!! It has been a long stinking time, I know. I can't thank you enough for your patience. If you're a follower on tumblr, you've heard me say over and over that teaching music on-line has NOT been easy, especially when half of my class is in person and the other is virtual all at the same time, and I have had very little drive to write at all because I've been so completely wiped out at the end of each school day. This chapter really took a lot out of me, for reasons you're about to see. I do need to warn you that this chapter contains some show-level violence, and threats of non-consensual sex (nothing actually happens to Beth, but plenty of threats are made). If those kinds of things bother you, skip over the section between the .oOo. breaks.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“I can’t believe you brought back a ham dinner,” Beth gushed as Daryl dropped heavily on the edge of the bed. “It definitely makes me less mad that you left without me.”

Daryl snorted a laugh through his nose, “The hell you mad for?”

Beth played with the hem of her shirt, pretending to find a loose thread particularly interesting. “I mean...not mad, I guess. It’s just...you’ve never just up and left before. Well, at least not without my knowing. But I woke up and you just...you weren’t there.” She forced herself to look up at him, fighting the urge to shy away when their eyes met. “I got a little worried,” she squeaked out.

“Why the fuck you worried ‘bout me?”

Beth could feel herself getting defensive, her ears and cheeks turning hot. “Gee, I don’t know. You just up and disappeared, no one knew where you went, when you planned on comin’ back. You’re out in the woods, not knowing what’s out there...or who. It’s not like we’ve been out scouting around to see what’s out there yet. What if a herd came through or you fell down into a ravine or someone...” She hadn’t realized just how worried she’d been about

him. She opened her mouth and drew in a breath to continue, but thought better of it and stopped herself, clamping it shut.

Unfortunately for her, Daryl saw right through that. “Nah, c’mon girl. Spit it out,” he demanded.

She knew she shouldn’t say anything more. She knew exactly where this conversation was headed, but she couldn’t think of anything else to say and now he was expecting something from her. “It’s just...you didn’t have me for...backup,” she finished, feeling stupid and embarrassed and just waiting for him to laugh at her.

She cringed when she heard him snort in response and waited for him to berate her for thinking he actually needed her help. If anyone could hold their own, it was Daryl. She wished she could just bite her tongue clean in two so she’d never be tempted to talk ever again.

But nothing came. No snide remarks, no laughing in her face. No telling her she’d be more of a burden than any actual help. Nothing.

Instead, all that came was his soft voice, “Yer right.” She looked up at him in surprise. “Just thought ya’d rather sleep, ‘stead-a traipsin’ through the woods in the cold at the hairy ass crack of dawn.”

Beth’s heart squeezed at that. Did that mean he didn’t mind having her with him while he hunted? That he might even need her? Not to mention that even if he would have wanted her there with him, he was once again putting her needs, her comfort, above his own by letting her sleep?

She felt her heart warm until she watched Daryl fight to hide a shiver. “You still cold?” she asked, knowing the house they were in wasn’t exactly warm, especially with no heat source other than the fireplace in the living room, but Daryl was usually such a hot box, so much so that she’d come to think of him as her own personal space heater. She was surprised to see the cold actually affecting him. “C’mon, boots off. You’ve definitely earned yourself some down time this afternoon.” As he toed off his boots and unbuckled his belt, Beth turned down the bed, crawling in first and holding the blankets back to invite him in with her.

Once they had settled into their usual positions, with her curled into his side and his arm around her back, they cuddled under the blanket. She began to run her fingernails lazily across his chest, like she did most nights when they were laying together just like they were now. When she felt the tension he usually kept in his arms and shoulders release, letting himself start to melt into the mattress beneath them, she slowed her hand and let her head rest fully on his chest, hearing his heartbeat slow as he drifted to sleep.

Beth knew she couldn’t do much to protect him. She tried her best to help him when they went on hunts together. She wasn’t anywhere near as skilled as Daryl was, but she was learning. And maybe he didn’t need Beth’s help or protection - he’d said as much to her more than once - but she could at least offer him comfort. She could be someone to worry over him and care for him. Daryl had never opened up about his family, his past, but she’d seen how Merle had acted around him and remembered that it didn’t seem to be a very caring

relationship between the two Dixon brothers. As far as she could tell, she may be one of the first to truly care for Daryl, despite how their so-called relationship began.

And maybe that was enough for now.

.oOo.

The group ended up staying in the same house for a couple more weeks as winter settled in for its prolonged stay, though they were always in search of a place big enough to hold everyone in new neighborhoods that hadn't been completely looted of food and supplies. Even with food sources dwindling, it would be crazy to just pack up and leave without an actual destination in mind, especially in the dead of winter. Whenever Beth and Daryl went hunting, which was basically every day, they picked a different direction than the day before and kept an eye out for new lodging as they searched for food.

One day they found an RV park and campground. At first, she was elated. Everyone could have their own place, their own semblance of privacy. As long as there was food to be found, this could really work out for the best for their group.

A feeling of sadness started to creep over Beth as they picked through what had been left behind in the first camper they came to. She couldn't help but think of all those families that had wanted to spend a part of their summer away from it all, who wanted to reconnect with nature for the weekend, all of whom must have been cut off from what was going on in the cities they were trying to escape. Or maybe they'd come here once everything had turned, hiding in the wilderness rather than fighting the crowds in the cities.

She remembered back to the chaos in the streets of Atlanta and on the highway to get back home when the world turned upside down all those months ago. Cars and vans haphazardly packed with belongings lining both sides of the highway. The monsters that came after her in her own car. They had all been sitting ducks. She knew she was lucky to have gotten away from all of that alive.

She fought hard not to think of the families being literally torn apart as walkers invaded their campsites, but found she was losing that battle quickly as a wave of grief for these unknown victims welled up inside her. Images of kids playing hide and seek in the trees, never to be found, began to run through the dark corners of her imagination. She was grateful when Daryl, always so observant, led her out of the camper they were searching and suggested she stay in the office building while he scouted around. "An hour, tops," he promised her.

After a few minutes of sitting at the reception desk, trying to clear her mind and focus on the task at hand, Beth set to work going through cabinets and drawers, pulling anything she could bring back to her family and packing it into her bag. She began humming to herself. (She'd read in her book that the baby could already recognize her voice, but she spent so much of her time staying quiet - most days she barely spoke above a whisper, mimicking Daryl's voice level when they were out hunting - that she had taken to softly humming when she was indoors, so the constant sound would hopefully make up for it.) Setting her bag down on the desktop, she began to explore the adjoining room of the front office.

As she made her way through the back storage room, Beth began to notice little things that left her feeling apprehensive. Her brother would have said her “spidey sense was tingling,” but now was not the time to reminisce. The more she looked around, the more hairs on the back of her neck and arms stood out. Some shelves held their contents neatly, while others were in utter disarray. Some chairs were tucked under their desks, some were sitting haphazardly around the room, but were still placed just so.

What really stuck out to her was that there was hardly any dust. Every house they’d gone through had had a healthy layer of dust growing on every surface. The only way for that not to happen is if there had been something disturbing the dust, which meant...

“The fuck you doin’ here?” a booming voice came from behind her.

Shit.

Beth whirled around, pressing herself as closely as she could to the counter and cabinets behind her, her hands gripping the chipped Formica countertop tightly to help keep herself upright. Blocking her only exit was a man holding her backpack by its straps in one hand. Behind him were several others, all of them large men, all of them filthy with grime and God knows what else.

“Asked you a fuckin’ question, bitch,” the apparent leader snarled at her, taking a step further into the room while shouldering the baseball bat he carried, allowing the rest of the men to crowd into the tiny back office. She counted five men altogether. Beth had always been a small girl, but she felt absolutely tiny and helpless as these burly men cornered her further away from any chance of escaping.

The sight of one of the men, his close-cropped hair a greasy gray with a wiry beard to match, toying with the handle of a large blade, a machete whose blade was hanging from his belt, dark with dried blood, jolted her out of her shock and forced her to give some semblance of an answer. “I...” she said with a shaky voice, swallowed, and tried again. “I was just looking for a place to stay the night. I didn’t know anyone was here.” Should it bother her how easily the lie came, even with her being terrified out of her wits? Perhaps, but this certainly wasn’t a time for self-reflection.

“Bullshit,” the man with the knife spat at her. “Dumb little bitch like you survive this long on her own?” He shook his head and sneered at her, “I don’t think so.”

“Remember what we did with the last idiot that messed with our shit?” said another, a man with long greasy hair and teeth that probably hadn’t seen a toothbrush since long before the dead started walking the earth. The way he licked his lips and sucked the bottom one between his teeth had Beth feeling both disgusted and terrified.

“Please,” she whispered, shaking her head as she shrank in on herself, “I’ll give back anything I found here, just please let me go.”

“And let a little thing like you out there on her own?” the leader asked mockingly, dropping his bat to his side. “Whadd’ya think, boys?”

The room started to spin around her, Beth's vision tunnelling as the men came even closer. "Hell no, not when we already know she puts out," the man with the long blade pointed at her belly from across the room. The rest of the men laughed raucously, and an icy fear left Beth unable to move, save for her hands moving to cover her baby bump without thought.

When the men began to crowd in on her, Beth's knees could no longer support her. She dropped to the floor, faintly registering when the edge of the countertop scraped along her spine, her hip catching painfully on a drawer handle. She curled herself around her growing baby, silently begging God to help her as she fought to get air into her lungs rather than hyperventilate.

"Don't worry," the man snickered as he let his bat drop with a thud to the floor, closing in until he was standing less than a foot away from her. "We're gonna take good care-a ya." He grabbed her upper arm and yanked her back to her feet. She yelped in pain, still unable to get her limbs to move, to run, to fight back. He had his arm around her waist, pressing her to him, surrounding her with his aggressive strength and putrid stench. She felt her stomach lurch violently and her head start to spin. She scrunched her eyes shut, praying for a miracle and bracing for the worst, her breath racked with unvoiced sobs.

"The fuck you will," growled out the only voice she wanted to hear in that minute. She heard two sounds simultaneously: boots turning on the cheap berber carpet, and the unmistakable sound of weapons being drawn. As relieved as she may have felt knowing Daryl had come to her rescue, she wasn't stupid - they weren't out of danger yet. "Let her go."

The man holding her readjusted to use her as a shield while laughing menacingly, "That yer daddy, comin' ta save his slut of a daughter?" He maneuvered her around, pulling her back to his front, and wrapped his thick forearm around her shoulders, just starting to put pressure against her neck. She instantly grabbed onto him, trying to pry his arm away with shaking hands, but it was no use. "Nah, I think we're gonna hang on to her for a while. Show her a good time. Don't she look fun, boys?" His taunt was met by another round of harsh laughter.

"Come on, Marty," he said to the older man with the blade, who turned to face the two of them, indicating that he did not perceive Daryl to be a threat. "Let's help her relax a little."

Beth scrunched her eyes shut, again, trying her hardest to breathe slowly to keep from fainting. She heard the familiar sound of Daryl's crossbow releasing a bolt, then the pressure around her neck suddenly vanished. The man's body fell to the carpet, but with his arm still around her neck and shoulders, his literal dead weight dragged her to the floor with him. She scrambled to get away from him, but there was nowhere to go, caught between a row of shelves, the counter, and the now dead man with one of Daryl's bolts protruding from his forehead.

The rest of the men stood in shocked silence for a moment as they processed what had just happened as Daryl rushed to load the next bolt.

Marty spun on his heels to face Daryl once he finally caught up with his senses. "You're dead, mother fucker!" he shouted, spurring the rest of the group into action. Beth tried to force air into her lungs, blood pounding in her ears as she fought to regain control. She sat,

staring, as if in a trance, as the four remaining men turned toward the door leading into the front office.

Another bolt released as Marty and the others moved toward Daryl, who immediately slung his crossbow onto his back and was already pulling his own knife from its sheath and crouching into a fighting position. One of the other three immediately screamed in pain; Beth saw the second bolt sticking out through both sides of his shoulder as he awkwardly stepped sideways, away from the fray but knocking himself into file cabinets and an empty water cooler as he stumbled.

Marty had hung back, letting the younger three in the group ahead of him, as if he was calculating, plotting. “Dammit, Earl,” he mumbled, looking with disdain at the one with the injured shoulder. “Get your ass to Tracy, see if she can deal with it. Not like you’d know what to do with either one of these fuckers, anyway.”

Beth stayed still and silent as the scene in front of her unfolded. Earl was slinking around to the main entrance, hissing in pain with every step. The remaining three continued moving into the front office, undeterred by their fallen comrade. Daryl at least had the advantage of the men bottlenecking through the doorway between the offices, and again between the furniture in the front room, but that would only buy him seconds at best. While Beth knew he could handle himself against as many walkers, she remembered their brief lessons where he would remind her time and time again, “Walkers don’t think, don’t plan - means they ain’t the biggest danger out there.”

The two in front, closest to Daryl, rushed forward together, boxing him in against the wall. The sounds of punches landing on flesh, yelling and grunting, and bodies crashing into furniture filled the office building. The realization that he wouldn’t be able to hold them off forever finally snapped her out of her daze and pushed her to move. Beth tried her best to move silently, not wanting to draw any attention to herself as she fumbled for the baseball bat she knew had to be close.

Never taking her eyes off the scene unfolding, her shaky fingers found the weapon, wrapped around it in a nervous grip, just before her other hand reached into her boot to make sure her own knife was still there. She took a slow step toward them, and another, watching as Daryl took as many hits as he was giving out. He hadn’t been beaten yet, but with two (though she was sure it would eventually be three) against one, he could only hold out for so long.

The three men were surrounding Daryl on all sides, the younger two punching and hitting any chance they got while Marty watched with an evil grin. It was a game to them. They were both just playthings to this inhuman group, or they would have just used one of their weapons to kill Daryl. For whatever reason, they wanted Daryl alive.

The realization made her stomach churn.

Daryl yelled out in pain, and Beth realized time was running out. Readjusting her grip one final time as she got within striking distance, she squeezed her eyes shut and swung the bat with as much strength as she had, hoping it would be enough to help Daryl.

Marty screamed, in pain or in anger, (it didn't matter which, really) as he turned around. "You stupid bitch!" he yelled out and lunged at her. She let out a squeak of fear, fumbling to get both hands on the handle of the bat again but ultimately dropping the weapon. She grit her teeth together, mentally kicking herself for dropping the bat which would have at least kept him at arm's length away from her, as she backed herself up to try to stay out of his reach.

Beth ran into a chair behind her, stopping her from her retreat, which gave her attacker a chance to backhand her across the face so hard she saw stars. She dropped to her hands and knees, her back to him, dazed for a second or two before frantically searching for the bat again. She had just managed to get her fingers around the grip again when the man behind her grabbed her by her ponytail and pulled hard, causing her to yelp in pain as he dragged her backwards until she was seated on her butt, her legs kicking up in the air with the force of it.

Her hands went to her head, trying to stop him from pulling the hairs from their roots, as she fought to get her feet back under her. Her boot slipped on something round - the bat, she realized - which was now rolling back away from her. Still struggling against her attacker, she reached with the toes of her boots to get the bat to roll back to her.

She sent up an instant prayer when the handle rolled right into her hip.

Marty let go of her hair to reach for her front. She didn't know whether it was her arm, her shirt, or her neck that he was reaching for, but whatever it was, it didn't matter. As soon as he was within striking distance, leaning over her, Beth swung her arms backwards over her head as hard as she could, just hoping to make contact. She didn't care if she got his head, back or shoulders. As long as she hit something and it got him away from her, even for a second, that's all she cared about.

Instead, he caught the end of the bat with both hands. While her plan hadn't worked the way she wanted it to, she was at least free from him. She scrambled away on her hands and knees again, reaching into her boot for her knife before turning to face him again.

Before he could turn the bat around to take a swing at her, she stayed in a crouch and rushed into his space, scrunching her eyes shut and working solely from muscle memory from her training with Daryl, her knife handle now fitting easily in her palm. Just as she'd practiced, she slashed and stabbed, feeling the pull as the blade sliced then pierced his flesh.

Once the deed was done, she peeked one eye open, then the other, to see what damage she'd dealt. There was a growing dark stain across his thigh, the flesh beneath it squirting and oozing blood.

He fell backwards onto the floor, holding the handle of her blade which was still embedded a few inches below his belt. She quickly found the bat and used it like a golf club to hit his arm so he would release her knife. She yanked the blade out of his leg, then stepped back to give a soccer kick right between his legs before turning to look for Daryl.

"Bill," Marty called out weakly. Beth instantly regretted not hitting him in the head. She couldn't kill another person, she just couldn't, not even someone belonging to this sick and twisted group...but she certainly could have knocked him out.

Before she could think to do anything, the one called Bill turned slowly to face her, like something out of a horror movie, revealing the knife he'd held earlier, now wet with fresh blood. Taking in what Beth had done, he smiled wickedly, a dark chuckle seeping through his rotting teeth. Instead of rushing toward her, he stood between her and Daryl and sneered at her. Calculating.

"You got that fucker under control?" he asked over his shoulder to the man still grappling with Daryl. "I think our little friend here could use some attention."

"No, no, no," Beth whispered her plea, shaking her head. Behind Bill, she saw Daryl take a strong punch right to the temple that had him staggering backwards against the wall, his eyes closed and jaw slack. She yelled out his name, willing him not to give up.

Her new attacker didn't even break stride. He moved slowly and scheming, in absolutely no hurry. As if this was exactly as he had planned. "Oh, you'll be screaming something else in a minute here, girlie. Ain't gonna be saying much of anything after that, though." He sheathed his knife in the case hanging from his belt, then brought his hands to the front to undo his belt buckle.

Beth riveted her attention back on Bill and adjusted her weapons, one in either hand, steeling herself while crouching down, making herself an even smaller target. Before the man could take more than a couple of slow steps toward her, he screamed out in pain, dropping to his knees. Both of his hands were reaching between his shoulders as his breath ran out, his scream dying off as he collapsed in front of her with Daryl's knife sticking out from the middle of his back, buried to the hilt just left of center.

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Daryl tried to climb to his feet, panting to try to catch his breath. His knees were unsteady, unable to carry his weight just yet, and he collapsed back to the floor where the body of the fifth and final man lay in a heap, a growing dark red spot forming beneath him.

Beth wanted to curl in a ball on the floor and cry, just completely break down after being attacked and having to attack someone herself. Only the pressing sense of urgency to get the hell out of this office, this RV park and away from anyone else who might be coming, won out against the feeling of giving up. First she had to breathe. Think it out.

Daryl was still barely moving, his breathing labored. His face was already mottled with bruises, his lip split, nose bleeding, and both eyes starting to swell shut. A closer look showed bruised and cut knuckles, but it was what hid beneath them that gave her real reason to move.

He'd been cut. Stabbed, more like it. Either way, there was a growing red spot on his shirt just under his palm.

There was no time to panic. He wouldn't be able to make it the trek home without bleeding out, which meant she had to do something now and hope it would be enough until her dad could get him the help he really needed.

Gauze. Tape. Could she stitch him up if she needed to? Where had she seen that first aid kit?

Stepping around the bodies that lay between Daryl and the back room, making sure to give Marty a wide berth, she made her way to the shelves, ignoring the groans of the two still bleeding out and listening for the sounds of any that may have already turned, or worse, other members of their group coming to look for them. The one with the injured shoulder had been sent to get help from someone; Beth briefly wondered how many belonged to this group.

She frantically searched for the large white plastic box, remembering to pull Daryl's bolt from her first attacker's head as she crossed the room. Picking up her backpack on the way, she returned to Daryl's side and opened the kit, thankful that it still looked to be in decent shape.

Beth pulled out the small bottle of rubbing alcohol, knowing it was absolutely necessary to clean his wound before dressing it, and regretting how much pain she was about to cause him. He was still so weak from fighting the three men...fighting to save her. Now it was her turn to save him. She pulled the last remaining bolt from where he kept them on his crossbow and moved to give it to Daryl to bite down on.

"Don't need that shit," he grit out through clenched teeth. "Ain't like pullin' out a bullet or nothin'."

Beth sighed testily. They didn't have time for his bullshit bravado. "Daryl, just do it," she said, raising her voice just enough to let him know she meant every syllable. It must have worked because the next thing she knew, he had snatched the bolt from her hand and placed the shaft between his teeth. "Breathe," she said, reminding both of them to do so with the simple command.

A choked off yell filled the space between them, and Beth's heart went out to Daryl, but she didn't have time to spare him much pity. Now that some of the blood had been washed away, she saw just how big the cut was, curving from front to back, as if someone tried to stab him but missed. She couldn't tell if there were any internal damages, but he most likely wouldn't make it back home unless it was sutured, at least until her father could get a look at it and do what she was just unable to. "I don't have anything to numb it," she apologized. "I'll go as fast as I can."

She set to work inserting a rudimentary line of stitches. If there were more than two that were even close to being uniform, it was by pure luck. As she tied the last one, she heard the unmistakable throaty growl of a walker taking its first raspy, post-mortem breath. Beth hurriedly taped layers of gauze over the wound, said a prayer that it would all hold as they made their way back home, and threw the contents of the first aid kit into her backpack.

"C'mon, Daryl," she said softly as she stood, shouldering her backpack and dragging a chair nearer to him. She lifted his crossbow and strapped it across her body before offering him a hand. "We gotta go."

She knew she was in no condition to try to lift him to get him standing. He would have to at least get to his knees before she could offer a shoulder to help support his weight. She pushed him as much as she could toward the chair, encouraging him to use it to pull himself up so she could help him again. She tried hard to fight the panic rising within her when he could

just barely get off the floor before plopping into the seat of the chair. Huffing and puffing, he grunted out, “Jus’ gimme a minute.”

She’d never seen him like this, where he let her see just how weak and vulnerable he was, how dependent on her he was. It was unsettling to say the least. The problem was, she didn’t really have a minute to give him to recover.

Once he was holding himself up on his feet, still supporting himself with one hand on the wall (to say he was stable was a far cry from the truth), she thrust the handle of the baseball bat into his free hand. With one eye swollen shut already, and the other reduced to a mere squint, his depth perception would be basically non-existent, but he could at least swing a bat at anything that got too close. If anything, he could use it as a cane if he wanted or needed to.

She took a quick peek out the door to make sure the coast was clear, and moved as quickly as she thought was safe for him without causing too much of a commotion or to tire themselves out. Before finding the campground, they had walked at least a few hours from when they left the house earlier that morning, and she had a pretty good idea of which direction they needed to go to get them there.

A mix of fear and determination drove every step. She didn’t want to stay within any kind of proximity to this terrible group, and Daryl needed more help than she could give him. They didn’t even have a moment to take one last, steeling breath before making their escape. Beth grabbed Daryl’s arm and threw it over her shoulders, rushing him as much as she dared toward the tree line.

It was slow going, stopping every couple hundred yards for the both of them to catch their breath, and even that was pushing them to the limit. After an hour or so, Beth already had to change Daryl’s bandage, stuffing the used gauze in the side pocket of her back pack. There was no way she would leave any more of a trail for anyone to follow. As it was, she could spot her and Daryl’s heavy, staggered footprints without really needing to look.

Maybe they’d get lucky and the other group wouldn’t have clue one as to how to track someone. Maybe.

It was well past dark when they finally made it back to the house to find the rest of their group anxious with worry about what had happened to keep Beth and Daryl so much longer than normal. Once they had taken a second to actually look at the pair of them, Rick and T-Dog rushed forward to catch Daryl, who was ready to drop from exhaustion, and carry him to Beth and Daryl’s bedroom. Beth shrugged out of everything she was carrying, tossing the backpack to the floor and ordering her father to follow the others to finally get Daryl properly attended to.

Lori supported Beth, guiding her across the living room toward the fireplace, but Beth fought when Carol offered her a chair to sit in. “I need to be in there with Daryl,” she argued, and eventually won as the older woman carried the chair to the bedroom after Beth.

Everyone followed her, all of them wanting details. Questions flew through the air so fast and thick that Beth couldn’t keep up, especially since her one focus at the moment was Daryl. She jumped when Hershel yelled out, “All right, everyone out.”

Beth opened her mouth to protest, but her father stopped her before she could. "I know I couldn't get you to leave if I tried, Bethie, but everyone else, save for Carol, needs to leave."

Carol moved the chair to the head of the bed, giving Beth a pointed look which silently demanded that she sit in it as the rest filed out of the too-small room. The older woman moved to the other side of the bed, staying out of Hershel's way until he needed her assistance with anything.

"These stitches probably saved his life, Beth," Hershel said as he carefully pulled the pieces of thread Beth had sewn into Daryl's side. "What happened to cause this?"

Chancing a glance at Daryl, she could see he was unconscious. Relief and worry battled through her. She knew he needed rest to say the least, and if he was unconscious, it would be easier on him when her father examined his wounds and resutured them. There was still that nagging feeling that made her heart race with fear. Was it blood loss that had left him knocked out? Was it something worse that he may not wake up from?

Beth reached for his hand and brought it carefully to her lap. It scared her to feel how limp it was, how there was no resistance at all, but it was warm, and she could feel his pulse throb in his wrist, faintly but definitely still steady.

Her father softly spoke her name again, gently demanding her attention. Right. What happened? Somehow, she knew he wasn't looking for the gory details, he was only asking so he knew how best to treat his patient, so she kept her story simple for now. "We were attacked. Daryl fought against three men. I'm pretty sure they each had some kind of blade, so I don't know..." she trailed off, exhaustion starting to get the best of her, both physically and emotionally.

Beth watched Daryl's face as her father worked on resuturing the wound. Once finished and everything was cleaned up, Hershel turned his attention back to his youngest daughter. "That's quite a shiner," he said softly, lifting her chin gently with his fingers as he examined her face. She'd almost forgotten she'd been hit in the first place. "Not much to be done for it now, unfortunately," he murmured, a sad look crossing his face as he dropped his hand back to his side. "You okay? Anything I need to check on you?" he asked, his voice heavy with concern.

"I'm okay," she said with as much conviction as she could muster. "Fell on my hands and knees once, but," Beth placed her other hand over her baby bump, "I think we're both okay."

Hershel nodded, not entirely convinced, but with no way for him to check on his growing grandchild, didn't argue.

Carol walked back in the room, though Beth hadn't even noticed her leaving in the first place. "Everyone's pretty anxious to know what happened to you two, but I don't imagine you much want to deal with all that right now," she said with a look of understanding. She was carrying a cookie sheet with some bowls of food and set it on top of the dresser. "You need to eat something, Beth. I doubt you've had anything since you left this morning."

Beth nodded, and although eating was most certainly not high on her list of priorities right now, she knew it should be. Now that her heart wasn't beating up in her throat anymore and Daryl was one step closer to being on the mend, it occurred to her she hadn't warned anyone about the group that could be on its way. "The guys that attacked us, they were in a group," she tried to explain through her exhaustion. "I don't know how many or if any of them followed us or..."

Hershel placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "We'll take care of it," he said, then gave her a litany of instructions before escorting Carol out of the room to leave Beth and Daryl in peace.

After several minutes, Beth finally released Daryl's hand, his pulse still just as strong and steady as it always had been. She stood slowly, feeling her muscles stretch reluctantly with each movement. On the tray that Carol had brought in, she saw a bottle of aspirin sitting next to an orange pharmacy bottle containing what she was sure was antibiotics for Daryl. She took an aspirin, washed it down with a gulp of cool water from the bottle Carol had also left. Their meal was to be a portion of some kind of stew and a shared can of fruit cocktail.

Beth ate and drank slowly. She was still worked up from everything that had happened to them earlier. Her body, and her baby, needed nourishment, and that ultimately won out against her addled nerves.

After a few minutes, a soft knock sounded at the bedroom door. Rick poked his head in, asking if it was alright for him to come in. He asked for details about what had happened, and Beth supplied anything she thought could be pertinent. Apparently, while she had been eating, the group decided the house was no longer safe, and any food supplies were beyond scarce anyway, so they'd be moving on as soon as they could.

Rick also told her that the rest of the group agreed that she shouldn't go hunting with Daryl anymore. "Not that you can't handle yourself," he quickly explained, "because you clearly can. But it can't just be you and Daryl anymore. We don't want to risk losing anyone, and there's strength in numbers." Beth nodded in agreement, knowing the man had a point. Besides, how much would she really be able to help in the coming weeks once Daryl was healed, anyway?

She had just finished her bowl of stew when Daryl began to stir. She guessed it had been at least an hour since they arrived back at the house. Beth moved to sit gently next to him, making sure to give him his space at the same time, not wanting to aggravate him or his fresh stitches. She jumped a little when he jolted awake, but had enough forethought to lay a hand gently on his chest to keep him from trying to sit up too quickly. "It's okay. We're safe. You're okay," she reassured him.

Daryl breathed heavily, rubbing his hand on his face a little too roughly, causing him to wince in pain and mumble a curse word or three. "Feel like I got hit by a truck."

"You're not far off," Beth replied. "You've got a bunch of stitches in your side, so try not to move too much. You need to take one of these," she got up and placed her bowl back on the tray before rattling a pill from the antibiotics bottle, then two aspirin into the palm of her hand and bringing the second water bottle with her to offer to Daryl. When he scoffed at the

pills, she rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Daryl Dixon, I have no qualms about having Rick and T-Dog come in here and hold you down to force you to take these. We don’t know how dirty that blade was and I am not going to lose you to infection because you’re too stubborn to take care of yourself.”

Daryl blinked up at her for a moment before answering, “How the hell am I supposed to take ‘em if I can’t sit up?”

Beth grinned and shook her head. “Smart ass,” she set the pills and water back on the tray then went to help Daryl get into a sitting position, supporting him as much as she could so he wouldn’t have to strain too much. As she adjusted a pillow behind his back, she realized it was the first time he’d been shirtless in her presence, at least while he was conscious, but she knew better than to point out that fact, though she wondered if he’d noticed, too. Once he was situated, she retrieved the drugs and stood waiting, arms crossed, until he took each one with a swig of water. “There’s a bowl of stew for you,” she turned and picked it up, handing it to him.

“What, you ain’t gonna spoon feed me?” he teased. At least he was in somewhat of a good mood, despite everything they’d gone through that day.

Sitting back in her spot on the edge of the mattress, she teased him right back, “Guess I could use the practice,” and made to take the bowl back from him.

“Shut up,” he grumbled, cradling the bowl close to his chest and spooning bite after bite into his mouth, hardly pausing to chew.

When he was finished, Beth took the bowl from him and asked, “You doing okay?”

“Better now with food and pain killers. Been through worse.” Beth held her tongue before she could let herself ask about one of those worse times, not sure she could handle hearing any of those stories at the moment. Instead she focused on the bowl in her lap, unsure of what to say. Another minute passed before Daryl spoke again, “You okay?”

Beth took stock of herself. The headache she’d had while they were making their way back from the campground had subsided, and she’d noticed her stomach gurgling as she watched her father work on helping Daryl, but now that there was food in her not-quite-full-but-at-least-not-empty-anymore belly, she was ready to curl under the blankets and sleep for at least two days. “Yeah. I’m okay,” she finally responded. “Thanks to you,” she added softly.

Daryl scoffed again, and Beth gave him a stern look. She was about to tell him exactly what she thought, but he beat her to the punch. “Shouldn’t’a left ya there in the first place. Fuckin’ stupid to split up like that,” he looked down, his fingers moving like they were itching to pick at the scabs that lined his knuckles.

Beth furrowed her brows together, “We’ve split up before on runs.”

“Yeah, in the same damn building,” he countered, “not when we’re out of ear shot of each other.” He let his head thud against the wall behind him, wincing in pain after doing so. “If I hadn’t gotten there when I did...” he trailed off, shaking his head.

Laying her hand softly on top of his, stilling them and the thoughts she was sure were spiraling in his mind, she spoke softly, "But you did. You saved my life, Daryl." She gave his hand a light squeeze as she added, "Again," then withdrew her hand back to her lap. "How did you know?" she asked after a moment when she exchanged Daryl's bowl for the can of fruit cocktail on the tray.

"How'd I know what?"

"To come back when you did," she explained. "Before you left, you said you'd be gone an hour tops, but you were back in less than ten minutes."

Daryl nodded his head in understanding. "I hadn't even made it back to the campers when I heard those assholes heading to the office. They must've just missed me, never looked my way. Don't think they knew you were in there. Didn't exactly look friendly."

It was Beth's turn to scoff in sarcastic agreement. "Think you can scoot a little? We can have some dessert," she suggested. She sat gingerly next to him once he made a space for her, kicking off her boots before stretching her legs under the covers next to his. They took turns stabbing pieces of syrupy fruit from the can, both eating much slower than they had with the hearty bowls of stew. Too exhausted in too many ways to put it back on the dresser, she set the can on the floor beside her, then turned to help Daryl scoot down on the mattress so they could both get some much needed rest.

"I'm so sorry, Daryl," she whispered after another quiet moment.

She felt him turn his head to look at her, felt him breathe sharply at the sudden movement. "The fuck you sorry for?"

Beth took a steadying breath, "You could have been killed, all because I couldn't handle going through an empty camper."

"Yeah, and if they found me by myself in that office instead, I'da been dead anyway." Their eyes met as she interpreted what he didn't say. They had been planning to do far more than just kill her, they'd basically said as much.

He let his head roll back to the pillow and looked toward the ceiling. "Ya saved my ass, today, Beth. I wouldn't be back here if it weren't for you, even if I had been able to take them all on myself."

The silence between them grew heavy. After a few minutes, she wondered if Daryl had already fallen asleep. In the back of her mind, Beth knew she needed to tell him everything her father and Rick had told her while she was waiting for him to wake up after being stitched up: that the group would be leaving the house at first light in search of a new place to hole up; that Daryl was not to go hunting until the stitches came out in two weeks; that someone would be coming with them from now on once he was completely healed.

It could all wait until morning. They deserved some unhindered rest tonight.

Beth had just let herself start to relax when she felt a...something...low in her belly, just under her belly button. It was similar to all the times she felt her stomach gurgling in the past few weeks, but so much stronger this time. Maybe it was just gas, she thought to herself, until she felt it again, just as strong and in the exact same spot.

She laid a cautious hand over the spot and waited. Sure enough, something was definitely moving in her.

“Daryl,” she whispered harshly, rapidly tapping the backs of her fingers against the back of his hand. She wasn’t about to apologize for waking him up, not for this. “Daryl, give me your hand...your other hand,” she said frantically. She ignored his grumbles and drowsy questions and reached for his hand, moving carefully so she didn’t disturb his wounds or their baby.

“Shh,” she commanded, placing his hand in the same place she’d had hers seconds ago.

Nothing happened. “Beth, what the...” Daryl started.

“Wait.” The tone in her voice must have let him know she was dead serious, and he sighed heavily and let his head drop back to his pillow.

Was he really that dense? Didn’t he understand what she was trying to show him? “Come on,” she whispered to her abdomen, willing their baby to move. After a long minute, she got her wish.

Daryl’s head shot up from the pillow beside her. Even in the darkness, she could tell he was looking at the bump beneath his hand. “Was that...?” He couldn’t form the words. Truth be told, neither could she. She just nodded her head emphatically, hoping he could tell without seeing. “Have...have you...felt that before?”

Beth shook her head, “Not like this. I mean, the book said it would feel like a little flutter, and I’ve been feeling my stomach gurgle a lot lately, but I thought it was just me being hungry or the baby being hungry or whatever. I didn’t realize...” She laid her hand on top of Daryl’s and looked up at him as she felt another sharp movement within her. “Oh my God, Daryl,” she whispered reverently. “That’s our baby!” Tears of pure joy began to roll from the corners of her eyes.

“Holy shit,” Daryl murmured in awe. He left his hand where it was as he let his head back down to the pillow, their noses nearly touching. “That’s fuckin’ crazy,” he laughed softly.

Beth joined him in a laugh, then pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. When she pulled back, she searched his face in what little moonlight filtered through the curtains covering the window. Even in the dim light, she could see how it was mottled with bruises, scabs littering his face where punches had split the skin. This man had taken a hell of a beating, had nearly died, all while trying to protect her. He could have left her behind, could have left the whole group behind, and no one would have known what became of them.

But this man, lying next to her beaten and bruised - on account of her - was a good man. He had sworn to protect her and take care of her, and had yet to fail her. She knew in her heart that he never would.

She knew that ultimately, she was lucky Daryl had found her and had offered to keep her fed and safe, even considering how things had progressed between them since they had met. He could have done any number of things to her out there in the woods when he'd first found her and no one would have known about it. Instead he'd brought her to a group of people. People who could act as a kind of witness, to give her a sense of security in the deal they had made between them.

Their relationship may have started as a kind of verbal contract, one where he knew she didn't have many other options and had taken full advantage of that, but as the months had passed, she had grown to care for him in spite of all that, and lately he had shown how much he cared for her in return. More and more, he was putting her needs before his, and his actions spoke volumes. He'd gone the extra mile more than once to make sure she was taken care of, that she was safe. That their baby was safe.

She didn't know how he would react. She didn't know if it was because she could finally feel her baby moving. She didn't know if her sheer exhaustion was making her do stupid things. More importantly, she didn't really care about any of that. She only knew what she felt at that moment.

"I love you."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading - please take a moment to leave a comment!

Chapter 16: Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Winter trudges on and eventually melts into Spring, which leads to some new beginnings. Relationships are evolving, but not all necessarily for the better.

Chapter Notes

Has it really been eight months since my last update? Jesus, I'm sorry. I'm trying to get a better handle on things lately, making some changes that I've been meaning to do for a long time. I have every intention of sticking to this newfound drive to create again, so here's hoping it sticks around for a while.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Beth hadn't realized she'd fallen asleep until she was jostled awake. Apparently the car she was riding in had turned off the deserted highway and onto a bumpy gravel driveway hidden by trees and shrubs grown wild in the mid-spring sunlight. She let out a soft sigh - another day, another house to search.

The weeks and months following the attack at the campground had been rough to say the least. While Beth and Daryl had been eating their simple meal and resting after their harrowing ordeal, the rest of the group had packed everything they had into the vehicles and began planning where to go next in search of food and shelter.

Beth learned that every time she and Daryl had gone hunting, Rick, T-Dog, Maggie and Glenn had been doing their own version of hunting by scavenging every house, store, and business office, stockpiling any kind of food with a shelf life and enough clothing to make sure their found-family stayed warm under plenty of layers. It had been thanks to their hard work that the group survived these past weeks on the road, and really throughout the winter, especially since Daryl was unable to hunt until he had completely healed.

Beth wasn't sure which had been worse to deal with: being cooped up in the car day in and day out as the group searched for a place to stay, or dealing with an incredibly irate Daryl as they did so. She understood his frustration, probably better than anyone else could have. She wanted to be able to stretch her legs, her cramped muscles, just as she'd gotten used to doing for the past five or six months. She learned from her pregnancy book that the third trimester usually brought on the "nesting" stage, and she was certainly feeling it all through her being. Unable to do anything to physically prepare for the birth of her child, her mind was filled

with thoughts and worries about the baby, how they would keep it safe in this world, where would they sleep, where would they find clothes or diapers or...

But then she would feel that wonderful little nudge from inside her belly, almost as if on cue, like her baby knew she was worried and was trying to be reassuring for her. Every time, Beth would lay her hand over where she had felt the movement within her and press down, ever so gently, letting the baby know she was there, too.

She had wanted to share these precious moments with Daryl, but ever since their last night in the house, the night after they'd been attacked - the night she'd said those three fateful words - he had been, well, more off-standish than usual. He hadn't said anything after she'd told him she loved him, not that she expected him to. He didn't yell. He didn't storm off and beat up a tree. In the two weeks they'd been cooped up together in the back of the van Rick was driving, he'd just been...quiet. At least, when he wasn't complaining about not being allowed to go into any of the buildings they'd found to look for supplies.

She tried to be understanding. It was vital to stay as silent as possible when they were out hunting, and any conversations they'd had before were in private. She knew he liked to keep things to himself, or at least between just the two of them, so it wasn't like she expected him to suddenly start chatting up a storm now that they were sharing a vehicle with three other people. He would speak when spoken to, contributing when the conversation called for it, but nothing much beyond that. She found herself missing their private talks after the long days of hunting.

Meanwhile, their sex life had basically come to a standstill. Beth told herself time and again that it was because there was even less privacy than ever before, that not even Daryl would dare try anything when everyone was living in each other's pockets the way they had been since being on the road again. What were they going to do, go at it while sharing the back seat with Carl? But there was still that nagging voice in the back of her head, filling her with doubt. *Did he hear you tell him you love him? Is he just pulling away, getting ready to head for the hills, but he's just being subtle about it?* She still didn't know if Daryl had heard her, and wasn't sure how to broach the subject to find out.

Her uncertain mind was relentless, placing more and more blame on herself. *Is he pulling away because I'm not as helpful anymore? Because I'm more of a burden on him...and once the baby's here, it'll be double?*

Am I that grotesque that he doesn't even want to try anything, that he won't even touch me? Admittedly, her baby bump had grown into a small beach ball, and any time she caught sight of herself in a mirror, she couldn't help but admire how much her baby had grown, stretch marks be damned. She'd spend just half a minute looking at herself from every angle she could, rubbing her belly and smiling softly, a nervous excitement coursing through her.

But that was how she felt. Was this making things too real for Daryl? Was this why he was staying so quiet, especially around her? Why he had barely touched her at all in the past several weeks? A part of her wanted to tell him 'tough cookies,' that he had just as big a hand in their situation as she did, and she certainly didn't deserve the silent treatment he'd been giving her, whether he reciprocated her feelings or not.

But then the rational side would step in and remind her just how much Daryl had done for her and the baby already, and that she should be grateful he hadn't deserted them from the get go.

To his credit, he had been following doctor's orders, at least for the most part. Hershel had said, in no uncertain terms, that Daryl was not to exert himself at all. Daryl had snarked at the older man, questioning his skill at stitching up the wound in his side, and been met with a withering look Beth had only been on the receiving end of a few times. "Young man," he'd said, "you will take these two weeks and allow those sutures to heal. I will not have my youngest daughter raise her child as a single mother because you're too bull-headed to ignore sound medical advice. You go to lift something, push something...hell, if a walker surprises you and you have to wrestle with it or even run from it, you could pop those stitches, and I don't have to tell you that we're running on a limited source of medical supplies right now. Not to mention the fact that unless you want me tagging along with you every day, if you were to get hurt out in the woods, you may not have enough blood left in you to get back here to get stitched up again." Daryl mumbled something that didn't quite sound like a 'yes sir' in response, but held his tongue beyond that and begrudgingly obeyed.

Maybe his ribs were still sore - more than he ever let on - and that's why he kept his distance. Maybe he was mad at her for winding up in that awful situation in the first place. Maybe if she had been smarter, a better fighter, Daryl wouldn't have had the ever-loving crap kicked out of him. He put his life on the line for her, the same girl he was stuck with for the foreseeable future, and all he was going to get out of it was another mouth to feed, another life to protect. She couldn't exactly blame him for wanting to keep his distance for a while.

They bounced from house to house as the weeks stretched into the entire winter season, much like they had after the farm had fallen, until they practically stumbled upon a storage facility just beyond the city limits, and T-Dog had just happened to have found some bolt cutters and had kept them, just in case, which allowed them to access the larger lockers. They were lucky enough to have found pieces of furniture so everyone at least had a place to sleep rather than bunking on the cold concrete floors.

The weather was a blessing and a curse. Georgia winter days rarely reach below freezing, but they did grow cold enough to slow down any walkers, which made scavenging and hunting only slightly easier. When the weather chose not to cooperate, sending icy rain for days on end, and leaving just wasn't a great option, the group was still okay. They were safe, they had food, they had plenty of furniture to choose from to sleep on. Things could have been worse.

But then the food stores started to get low. Even with careful rationing, they all knew that sooner rather than later, they'd have to venture back into the broken world and start all over again. On the plus side, spring tended to come early in the South, which meant plant life reemerging after the cold winter months, which drew out more animals to hunt to provide fresh protein.

Beth learned quickly that the weeks of staying indoors in the back of the Grimes' van had done a number on her stamina for tracking with Daryl, not to mention that without her burning as many calories, her baby had grown by leaps and bounds while she rested. When she'd first started hunting with Daryl again, it looked like she was trying to carry a dodgeball under her sweater. Her back ached after a mere hour or so of walking whenever she set out

with Daryl for the day, while her swollen feet and ankles throbbed within her boots. Regretfully, she knew her chances for time spent alone with Daryl were over, at least for the time being. She had hoped that being away from everyone else in the group would give the two of them a chance to talk things out a little, whatever that might entail.

At least Daryl had the decency to look disappointed when she told him she wouldn't be going with him anymore. Instead, he started bringing Carl and Rick with him most of the time when he'd go hunting. "More male bonding," Lori would joke with her. Beth would smile along, but couldn't help but notice the sadness hidden in Lori's eyes that she was sure reflected in her own. She understood the hidden meaning there all too well; they were both strong women who didn't take lightly to being left behind, both wanting nothing more than to be with their men, helping them instead of feeling helpless.

While they spent so much time together, Beth bonded with the Grimes family, especially with Lori. Beth had read her pregnancy book several times over by now, but she knew the authors couldn't possibly explain *everything*. The two women grew very close, comparing their pregnancies, sharing worries and cautious excitement about the future. Daryl and Rick grew closer, as well, though Beth only heard tiny snippets of any conversations they had. Their car had usually been leading the convoy, but was now relegated to the last in line because of all the bathroom stops the two pregnant women needed. On more than one occasion, Beth and Lori would be making their way back to the highway to find Rick and Daryl (and usually Carl) leaning against one of the bumpers, chatting away as if they hadn't been spending the last several days in the same van. Beth only hoped Rick was imparting some fatherly advice to Daryl, just as Lori had been sharing her 'tales of motherhood.'

Daryl had taken to riding his bike again once the winter weather broke. Beth's belly was too big for her to be able to hold on and still feel safe, so she ended up staying in the van. She thought back to the months gone by and would start missing the feel of the wind in her hair, the rumble of the engine beneath her, and the feel of Daryl's solid body in her arms, the feel of his warm leather vest against her cheek. He'd taken up as the look-out, scouting ahead any neighborhoods that he deemed safe enough for the group to hole up in for at least a couple of days. After a week or so, he stopped riding ahead and instead stayed near the back of the caravan with the van. Even when they had to stop for yet another potty break, Daryl would stop with them.

Beth held onto the tiniest hope that it was all because he wanted to be near her, even if they couldn't be together like they'd been before. At least it was something.

Spring had certainly sprung, and as the days lengthened and warmed, more and more wildlife started making itself known. The problem was, the group found it increasingly difficult to find a place that had room for everyone that was also near any kind of wooded area for Daryl to hunt in. He would often return complaining that the woods weren't dense enough to keep the walkers, which had unfortunately rejuvenated in the warming temperatures, from coming through and scaring off all the wildlife. It didn't stop him from trying, though, even if he only had a few hours to hunt while everyone else stretched, napped, scavenged, and consulted their maps to decide which towns to try next.

Which brought them to the house they were currently parked in front of. It looked like it had seen much better days, even beyond the weeds and vines that had taken over. Between the paint peeling from the faded wooden siding, the broken windows, and shutters and screens hanging askew from their windows, the only redeeming quality the house seemed to have was a roof and a decent square footage to shelter their group for a few days.

After waiting in the cars with Lori, Carol, and her father, Beth heard Rick's signal that the rest of the group had cleared the house and it was safe for them to bring in what little supplies they had to try and make camp for the night. She watched as Daryl plucked clean an owl he'd apparently found somewhere in the house, wondering just how it would taste. Her heart sank as she saw how much of the bird's shape was actually just feathers, realizing just how little there would be to share with the rest of the group.

Carl rushed into the room with a small smile on his face, carrying two large cans and an opener, and there was a palpable sense of hope and excitement at the thought of some kind of canned stew. Watching the can turn as Carl opened it, Beth saw a picture of a dog on the label and nearly cried. Were they really reduced to eating dog food? Would that be even remotely safe to eat, especially for her and Lori?

She was momentarily relieved when Rick took the can from his son and tossed it into the fireplace, deciding for everyone that they would not stoop to that level, at least not today. T-Dawg gave the signal that a small herd of walkers were making their way toward the house, probably having followed the cars right up the driveway. Everyone rushed back to the vehicles as if they were all part of a choreographed dance, moving like clockwork to get on the move as quickly as possible, and the pitiful meal was forgotten.

Once the walkers were no longer in sight, about a mile back down the highway, the caravan pulled to a stop, allowing everyone to gather once more around the map to decide where to try next. Once a route had been chosen, Daryl suggested to Rick that they try and hunt while everyone else refilled water bottles and took care of anything else that needed attention.

Less than an hour later, the two men returned with a noticeable spring in their steps. They gathered everyone together and spoke with more excitement than any of them had heard in months. They had found a prison. Walls, fences...more security than they'd been able to find since the farm. The only catch was that the yard was overrun with walkers, which would need to be cleared out before they could even think of staying there for any amount of time.

When the cars pulled up the dusty gravel road leading to the prison, Rick made assignments for their plan of attack. The whole ordeal went ridiculously fast, the group moving, again, like clockwork. Once all the walkers in the grassy yard were taken care of, Rick led them up the path toward the prison, near one of the watchtowers. They all moved a little easier, smiled a little easier. Their work wasn't over yet, not by a long shot, but this was a huge step.

Daryl managed to bag a handful of squirrels, a veritable feast compared to the dog food they had almost eaten earlier that day, and he and Rick checked and rechecked the perimeter, ensuring that the fences were secure enough for the group to sleep behind. Daryl had taken up a post on an overturned bus while the rest of the group set up camp and a small fire to roast their meal. Beth helped Lori divide out their rations in the mismatched set of bowls they had, glancing up when Carol excused herself.

Beth nibbled on her meal, her mind consumed with thoughts of Daryl. He and Rick had found a safe place for them all, then provided them with food to fill their starving bellies, and neither of them were here with the group they worked so hard to protect. She knew better than to think she could talk Daryl into coming back to the fire and join the group for some supper, so she made up her mind to bring the supper to him while it was still warm. He deserved so much more than that, but at the moment, it was all she had to offer him.

As she drew nearer to the bus, she saw two silhouettes in the moonlight, and realized just where Carol had gone when she had left earlier. “Screw around?” Had Beth really heard that right? Taking another few steps closer, she heard, “I just noticed you and Miss Blondie haven’t exactly been the happy couple for a while. Need to...get some frustrations out? Cause I’m sure I can find a way to help with that.”

Beth’s heart froze, her breath caught in her throat. “I mean, really,” Carol continued, “all she’s given you since she showed up is a pain in the ass and another mouth to feed. A man like you needs...a woman who can keep up with him and give him what he wants. What he really needs.”

It turned out it wasn’t her breath caught in her throat, it was the meager contents of her stomach. She didn’t wait to hear Daryl’s response. She couldn’t bear it. Beth turned tail and moved as quickly as she could, one hand pressed over her mouth and the other holding the bowl with Daryl’s dinner in it so tightly her fingers were cramping. She didn’t care. She just needed to get as far away from that conversation as she could.

Was *that* the reason Daryl had been so distant for the last few months? Had he secretly been getting together with Carol this whole time? Beth and Lori were never on watch duty, at least not at night. She knew everyone else had been scheduled on a rotation for night watch, but it had never occurred to her...

“Bethy!” her father called out. Without even realizing it, she’d made her way back to the campfire when she’d meant to stay in the shadows to calm herself down before rejoining the group, as if a part of her knew she needed her family now more than ever. “Your sister and I were just reminiscing all those times we’d go camping under the stars out in the north field. You two would roast marshmallows to your hearts’ content, not a care in the world.”

There was no getting away from this one, no going off on her own, even for a minute. She moved slower, hoping that her heavy breathing would look like she was just winded from the walk uphill and not that she was trying to stave off crying or getting sick...or both. She made her way to sit in the spot she’d left a few minutes ago, standing another moment, stretching her back and looking at the sky for a few more deep breaths, hoping none would be the wiser. When she thought she had her emotions under control, she slowly sat down and gave her father a soft smile. “I remember, Daddy.”

Beth was grateful for the quiet moment that followed, until her father spoke again. “Sing ‘Patty Reilly’ for me. I haven’t heard that, I think, since your mother was alive.”

She tried to hide her panic, hoping the shadows thrown by the small fire would hide her face going pale. On top of everything Beth had just heard, now her father wanted to hear her mother’s favorite song.

Maggie spoke up, pulling Beth's attention to her sister. "Not that one, Daddy." Their eyes met over the dancing flames, a connection Beth hadn't felt since the morning on the farm when her biggest secret was ruined for her.

In their months on the road, Beth and Maggie hadn't exchanged many words, let alone made any headway in healing what used to be a close relationship with each other. And now, when Beth needed it most, here was her big sister, apparently picking up on her distress, even if she didn't know the full cause of it, and holding an olive branch to pull her out of it.

Their father, however, was seemingly oblivious, and tried again, "How about 'Parting Glass'?" His kind, blue eyes all but twinkled in the firelight, and Beth fought to find a way to tell him no, that she wasn't in the mood to sing, but certainly not wanting to disclose the real reasons why.

"No one wants to hear," she tried. She hated disappointing her father, but she was just going to have to.

Glenn piped up, "Why not?" followed by a soft, "ow" when Maggie elbowed him in the ribs. Beth grinned and she fought back a giggle. It felt so good to laugh with her family again.

"C'mon, Bethy," Maggie covered for Glenn's accidental misstep. "I'll sing it with you."

A fresh set of tears welled up in her eyes, but these were tears of relief. There was hope to save her broken relationship with her sister, and this was the proof. She nodded once, closed her eyes and began to sing, a sense of calm flowing through her when she heard her sister's voice join her own.

God, it felt good to sing out loud again. As the song went on, her baby danced within her, obviously reacting to this new sound. She felt more connected, more motherly, and let the feeling completely consume her, a peaceful happiness flooding through her..

When the song had ended and she opened her eyes again, she saw that Rick, Carol and Daryl had all come back to the campfire. She found herself surrounded by sad smiles from her found-family. Well, from everyone except Carol and Daryl. Carol just looked annoyed... irritated, even, while Daryl looked at her with an unreadable expression.

Rick's voice gently broke the peaceful silence that had fallen over the group when the sisters' song had ended, encouraging them all to push through tomorrow morning to clear out the inner prison yard of walkers so they could make their way to the cells inside the prison. He was so sure of finding the cafeteria, armory, and infirmary that it was hard to argue with his plan. Before everyone prepared for bed, Beth struggled to get back on her feet to go for one more potty break before trying to find sleep. A strong pair of hands helped to hoist her up, and Beth was surprised to find Maggie behind her, offering to walk with her.

"I'm proud of you, Bethy," Maggie began as they walked together down the path.

"It was just a song."

“No,” the older sister argued gently, “it wasn’t. And it’s not just because of the song that I’m proud. You’ve surprised me, surprised us all, to have handled everything with such grace and strength and...God, Bethy, I’m so sorry.” Maggie went on, crying, apologizing again and again for deserting her baby sister when she needed her most, wrapping her arms around Beth as best she could with her baby belly between them and holding on tight.

“It’s okay, Mags,” Beth whispered through her own, soul-cleansing tears. “I forgave you a long time ago. I just thought you didn’t want anything to do with me.”

She felt Maggie shake her head, conveying her unabashed “no.” “Never,” she argued. “Never again. I’m going to do everything I can to make it all up to you, just say the word,” she concluded, holding her in another tight hug.

“Careful,” Beth teased, “the pregnant lady hasn’t had a chance to pee yet.” Both sisters laughed through their tears, pulling slowly away from each other, the first steps on the road to healing now behind them.

When Beth had finished her business and they were making their way back up the hill, Maggie asked, “So what had you so shook before Daddy asked you to sing. It wasn’t just Patty Reilly.”

With a heavy sigh, Beth told Maggie what she’d overheard. It was cathartic to get it all out and off her chest, but saying it all out loud made her heart heavy with sadness despite her reconciliation with her sister.

“I figured it was something like that,” Maggie began. When Beth looked at her questioningly, she explained, “You left with a bowl full of food for Daryl, but came back with it a couple minutes later. I figured something happened, because I’ve never seen Daryl turn down food. Glenn told me when he’d come back from looking for Sophia, he had blood running down his chin onto his shirt. We’re pretty sure he ate a damn squirrel raw.”

She gave Beth a second to process that image before continuing. “First of all, Carol’s an idiot for even trying something like that. I mean, what the hell? Who actually *does* something like that, especially to a pregnant woman?” She looked back at Beth, “I’m fairly certain nothing actually happened, though.”

Beth gave her a confused look, pulling a hearty laugh from Maggie. She’d missed hearing that laugh more than she realized. “How do I put this delicately?”

“Like you have a delicate bone in your body,” Beth retorted with a sisterly sarcasm that had become second nature over the years.

“Alright, fine,” Maggie replied with mock outrage followed with a grin. “You and Daryl aren’t as quiet as you think you are, and believe me, Daryl has some staying power. If Carol had gotten her way, Daryl wouldn’t have been sitting by the campfire in time to hear you sing. The song was too short by at least ten minutes.”

Beth felt her cheeks glow with embarrassment, then something dawned on her. She’d had her eyes closed the whole time she’d been singing. “Wait...he heard us sing? How much?”

Maggie grinned, “Pretty much the whole song. You didn’t see, but he was drawn to you like a moth to a flame. Carol, on the other hand, looked like someone had just pissed in her Cheerios. Now I guess I know why.”

They had to cut their conversation short when they reached their camping spot again. T-Dog and Glenn were on watch first that night, but Daryl was still sitting up next to the yoga mat Beth had claimed as her own tiny mattress when she didn’t have an actual bed to sleep in, along with a sleeping bag. He was watching the dying flame in the center of their group, but looked up as the sisters entered the shrinking circle of light, his eyes locked on hers instantly.

Maggie placed a gentle hand on Beth’s shoulder, giving a light squeeze before leaving her for the opposite side of the fire where Glenn was sitting. Beth made her way around the group, careful not to disturb anyone who was already laying down, then went to get down on all fours before finding a comfy position to try to find sleep for the night. Daryl held out a hand to help her, which surprised her to say the least, but she took it nonetheless, grateful that he wasn’t actively avoiding her. She decided to sit up with him for a while, taking a moment to stretch her lower back and take some deep, calming breaths before trying to find sleep. “Did you ever get anything to eat?” she asked him. He answered with a shake of his head, and Beth rolled her eyes and shook her head right back at him, then reached over for the bowl of food she had been carrying for him earlier and handed it to him.

She watched out of the corner of her eye as Daryl chowed down on the small meal of squirrel meat. It wasn’t long before he handed the bowl back to her, which she took and noticed a decent sized piece of food left sitting in the bottom. Beth tried giving it back to him, “But you...”

“Nah,” he argued gently. “You need it. You and the kid.”

Beth’s heart soared with happiness. As if on cue, their baby moved within her belly, which wasn’t uncommon when she was getting ready to try to find some sleep. Without a second thought, she took Daryl’s hand and placed it on her belly just in time for another well-placed kick to meet his palm. “Holy shit,” he whispered. He left his hand in place until he felt another kick, then slowly took it back. “Gonna be a good runner.”

Beth giggled at his observation. After the conversation she had with Maggie and now this tender moment with Daryl, her heart felt lighter than it had in weeks, regardless of what she’d heard Carol say. Her smile died down as she recalled the other woman’s words and she tried to think of a way to broach the subject with Daryl, but wasn’t sure how to bring it up, or if she really wanted to hear his answer.

“Ya look beat, girl,” Daryl commented after a moment. Right on cue, a yawn slipped from her mouth, and Beth couldn’t deny how good it felt to let her eyes drift closed. She lowered herself to lay on the ground, finally finding a small semblance of comfort when she turned onto her left side. She didn’t particularly want to turn her back toward Daryl, but her guilt vanished when she felt him move behind her, nudging one arm for her to rest her head, the other slowly wrapping around her until his hand landed on her belly once more. She fell asleep soon after, her baby kicking his father’s hand, the man she loved with his arms around her.

She grumbled herself awake just a few hours later when Daryl had tried to carefully remove his arms from around her. "Sorry, girl," he whispered before pressing his forehead to the curve of her shoulder, which Beth took as meaning he didn't want to have to move either.

"It's okay," she mumbled, her voice froggy with sleep. "Need to get up and pee, anyway."

Daryl stood and shouldered his crossbow, then turned to offer his help in getting her to her feet again. "I'll walk with ya."

Once she had taken care of her business and they started the walk back up to the small campfire, Beth realized this was probably going to be her only chance to ask about what had happened between Daryl and Carol earlier that night, but she was still struggling how to bring it up. She couldn't just come right out and say it, could she?

"Spit it out, girl," Daryl broke through her thoughts. Even though they'd spent very little time together, he was still able to read her like a book.

"I..." she began, stumbling through her words, "I came down to see you earlier, had a bowl of food saved out for you, and I...I heard Carol talking to you."

Daryl nodded next to her, "Figured you did." She looked up at him questioningly until he explained. "Saw yer silhouette when you were high-tailing it back to the fire." Beth felt her cheeks warm, hoping the man next to her wouldn't be able to see her blush as they neared the campfire.

"I didn't know what else to do," she mumbled. "I certainly didn't want to wait around to see if anything happened. I'm glad it didn't."

She had taken a few steps before realizing Daryl was standing several feet behind her. "That what you think-a me?" Just as quickly as her cheeks had flushed a moment ago, the blood now drained from her face. "What, that I spend all this time makin' sure yer okay, then just turn around an' fuck someone else?"

"Daryl, n...no!" Beth stammered, shaking her head as she floundered to find the right words to explain herself. "Of course not, I...I didn't mean it like that." She took a cautious step toward him, "I just meant...well..."

Daryl took two quick strides to stand directly in front of her. It was all Beth could do to stand her ground and not cower before him. "Nah, girl, let's hear it. How exactly did you mean it?" She could feel the anger pouring off of him.

She swallowed down her fear and took a slow breath to calm down her pounding heart, subconsciously rubbing her hands over her belly in soothing circles as she tried again. "I just meant that we haven't been...close, not for..."

"Months."

"A long time," Beth finished at the same time that Daryl spoke, noting that he sounded as unhappy with their situation as she had been...though he certainly could have been feeling

that way because of her inadvertently accusing him of cheating. “And I didn’t know why, and you wouldn’t hardly talk to me. And I know you’ve been busy - everyone’s been busy - and we don’t have hardly any privacy at all anymore. But then I started looking like this,” she gestured toward her belly, “and I can’t go hunting with you anymore and I didn’t know...” She let out a heavy sigh, “I didn’t know if you just didn’t want me anymore, if you realized how much of a burden I was, if our deal was off because I was staying with Rick and Lori and Carl all the time now.” Beth cast a quick glance over her shoulder at the rest of the group, still sleeping around the dying fire. “So when I heard Carol tonight and thought maybe it was all because you’d...take her offer as an out. That you’d think she was right, that I’m not what you want or what you need.”

Beth flinched a little when Daryl snorted through his nose, and started worrying her fingernails when he turned on his heels and walked away from her, running his fingers agitatedly through his hair. There was no hope in holding any tears back. Now she’d done it. If he hadn’t realized all those things she’d been worrying about, he certainly did now that she’d spelled it all out for him. Figuring Daryl needed some space away from her, she turned slowly and started waddling back up the hill to try to find another few hours of rest before the sun started the new day.

“What the hell you want from me, girl,” she heard from behind, then turned back around to see Daryl, arms outstretched and a face full of exasperation. In two quick strides, he was back to standing directly in front of her. “Huh?” Even in the dim firelight, she could see his eyes were clouded with hurt and anger. Something, call it woman’s intuition, told her to stay quiet and let him say his peace.

“I’m out there every damn day, bustin’ my ass, bringin’ back any food I can find, anything to make sure you’re safe and fed and warm and...who you think I’m doin’ it all for? Cause it sure as hell ain’t for any of those assholes up there. I do it all for you, to make sure you and the baby survive and that you’re taken care of. And now one horny bitch comes up lookin’ for some and you think...”

“Daryl, I’m sorry!” Beth exclaimed as loudly as she dared. “I didn’t mean...”

“Yeah, you didn’t nothin’,” he interrupted. “Don’t know nothin’, either.” He brushed past her and stomped the rest of the way up the hill, past the fire, to the chain link fence that surrounded the yard to check, once again, for any weak spots.

Beth slowly made her way back to her spot within the group, making sure she took enough time to stop the tears that had started to silently roll down her cheeks. No one else was awake, from what she could tell, but she didn’t want to wake anyone with her sniffing. She struggled to find a comfortable spot again, then fought to find sleep, desperately missing Daryl’s arms around her.

Don't hate me. If you've read any of my stories (or comments on others) you know I won't have these two at odds for long.

This chapter was a little shorter than I'd imagined, but if I included the next part that's swimming in my brain, this would be insanely long, and while I'm not opposed to longer chapters, I wanted to get something out to you guys sooner rather than later. So. Ta-dah!

The next chapter is supposed to be from Daryl's POV, so we'll see how that goes.

Thanks so much for reading - please take a moment to leave a comment!

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Daryl does what he can to make things right between himself and Beth. The group moves into the prison, and meets more than one obstacle on the way.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry. I know, I tell other writers all the time "don't apologize, just update when you can," but...man, when I would finally have time, energy AND motivation to write, these two would just drag their feet and argue with me every step of the way as we figured out how this chapter was going to go. But, finally, we all got our crap together and worked it out. So, thank you very much for your patience.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Daryl was still stewing in anger when the sun rose the morning after his fight with Beth. Had it actually been a fight? If it had been, it was certainly unlike any fight he'd ever been in before. No raised fists, no insults thrown at each other. Hell, Daryl was the only one to use any profanities.

But then, nothing with Beth was like anything he'd experienced before.

"What's put a bee in your bonnet?" a voice asked from behind. Daryl turned to see Rick walking in his direction wearing a ridiculously goofy grin.

"Shut the hell up, man," Daryl spat back at the man who had quickly become the first real friend he'd ever had. Yeah, there was the handful of people he tolerated from his past, although he knew that most of them really wanted to see his brother and his stash of drugs rather than actually interact with Daryl. With Rick, he got the sense that someone actually gave a shit about him...though definitely not in the same way that Beth did.

Just the thought of her had Daryl scowling deeper, and despite his best attempts all night, he still couldn't understand exactly what had happened between them. It just didn't make any damn sense. She trusted him to take care of her, to keep her safe and fed, but not to be faithful to her? He'd laid down his life to save hers, got the absolute shit kicked out of him trying to protect her. Wasn't that enough to show her just how he felt about her? How much he fucking cared about her?

Yeah, they hadn't had sex in a long ass time, but didn't she know it had nothing to do with her and everything to do with...literally everything else? He was bone tired every damn day, half starved and exhausted, not to mention there wasn't even a hint of privacy for anyone these last few months. They'd been sleeping in cars most nights and sharing a room with others in the group the rest of the time. Not exactly ideal circumstances to get down and dirty and fuck her the way he really wanted to. While that might not have stopped him before, things were different now.

He was different now. Who knew a tiny little blonde with the bluest eyes he'd ever seen could get him to change so much without him even noticing?

Truth be told, he couldn't wait to get his hands on her again, and despite what she thought, the new shape of her body did nothing but turn him on, which was a hell of a surprise to him. He damn sure wasn't going to try anything until they had walls around them and a door that locked so he could show her just what she did to him.

Which, Daryl guessed, was part of the reason Rick wanted to talk to him. Well, at least the part about finding a way inside the prison so everyone could have some space of their own, not necessarily how the pregnant female form was a turn-on. He'd gladly talk with the man about whatever he wanted - anything to stop thinking about Beth - if only he'd stop grinning like an idiot.

Thankfully, Rick cut the bullshit and started going over his plan to clear the inner yard - the concrete pavilion that was now swarming with walkers. It would take their strongest fighters - Rick, Glenn, Maggie, T-Dog, and himself - in a tight formation, working their way through until they could close the interior gates, creating a safe path for the rest of the group to get inside the brick walls of the prison.

"So what happened with you and Beth last night?" Rick asked once the plans were as finalized as they could be.

Just when he'd gotten her out of his head for a minute. Dammit. "Whatcha mean?" he played dumb.

And there was that stupid grin again. "Like we told Maggie and Glenn, you ain't as quiet as you think you are." Daryl rolled his eyes as he went on. "Didn't hear exactly what all went down, but *something* went down, and not in the fun way. So what'd you do?"

"Some bullshit she put in her own head 'bout me screwin' around with Carol," Daryl scoffed. "Thinkin' I don't want her no more or something stupid like that."

Rick nodded thoughtfully before asking, "Is it true?" Daryl's eyes snapped up to meet the other man's, shock and anger racing through his veins, but Rick stayed cool as a cucumber. "Either part?"

"Course not," Daryl spat.

"Hmm," Rick nodded again. It pissed Daryl off, to be honest. Him acting like he was this sage wiseman about to spout off some bullshit advice. Like he had it all figured out. "What

can I say?" There was that dumbass grin again. "Hormones are a bitch. Before Carl was born, Lori was a mess. Worse than...well. I never knew what was gonna set her off. Ice cream not softening fast enough but then melting too fast, her favorite show was interrupted by some political news, her mom made another suggestion for baby names. It could be anything. All I knew was I was gonna catch hell for it, every little bit." He shrugged, "I tried my best not to take it personal."

Daryl took a few paces, glaring at the man as he walked, working out how to say just how stupid he thought that was. "How the hell am I supposed to not take it personal when it's about me?" he growled at Rick.

Rick shrugged, taking a step back, hanging his head and resting his hands on his hips before looking back at Daryl. "I dunno, man. But you gotta make it right. For her sake as much as for yours. Beth's scared. She's about to have a kid - in a prison - in the middle of a damn apocalypse. And she's not having the normal concerns that pregnant women have...had. Something tells me she's not worried about how she'll get her figure back, or what color to paint the nursery. I mean, shit, I'm scared for her and Lori both just...surviving the whole thing. More than that, her relationship with her family is strained at best. And now, apparently you two are at odds, too." He fixed Daryl with another knowing look. "You gotta make it right," he repeated, then clapped him on the shoulder before turning to gather the rest of the team to start clearing the inner prison yard. "But not now. Right now, we gotta get in those fences and get rid of these assholes."

.oOo.

Everything went according to Rick's plan to clear out the inner yard surrounding the C Block of the prison. The team reluctantly agreed with Rick when he pointed out there couldn't be a blind spot, that they'd have to push in and clear and secure the cell block. Once they gave the all clear, the rest of the group started hauling everything from the cars to their new home, temporary or not, while others hauled the former prisoners' bodies outside to be burned. Exhausted as he was, Daryl made sure Beth didn't carry anything heavier than pillows or blankets. Any time he took something heavier from her, she gave him a small, sad smile as a thank you.

Well, at least it was something.

When it came time to claim who was sleeping in which cell, Daryl made it known that he wasn't sleeping in no damn cage, dragging a mattress from one of the unclaimed cells on the upper level to take his spot on the perch at the top of the steps and stooped over to pull his shoes off before laying down.

His over-tired brain eventually kicked into gear. What the hell was he thinking? Leaving Beth on the ground level while he might as well be sleeping in a completely different room? What, like she was gonna sleep on the floor with him, mattress or not? He looked down to the lower level and saw Rick looking up at him expectantly, hands on his hips (again) and eyebrow raised, then shaking his head before turning to go to his own cell with his family.

Well, shit. So much for making it right. Daryl sighed. He was beyond exhausted, and he'd use that excuse to explain why he hadn't thought of it on his own in the first place if anyone

asked, but he knew Rick was right, even before his silent disapproval. He shoved his feet back into his shoes, grabbed his pancake of a pillow, and made his way back down the steps.

Stepping quietly into the cell she'd chosen, he saw Beth laying on the lower bunk, her eyes glinting in the fading evening light, her hand lightly stroking her beach ball of a belly. She looked more tired than he felt, and yet still as beautiful as ever; Daryl could only imagine how much of a toll the last several weeks had taken on her.

Was there more he could have done to help her? Yeah, he kept her safe and fed, but was that really enough? He'd thought it was. It was more than either of his parents had ever done for him.

The more he thought about it, the deeper it hurt that she could even consider that he would step out on her. As if she wasn't the most important person in this whole fucking world to him. How could she not know?

Because you haven't told her, ya fuckin' moron.

"Hey."

Her soft voice pulled him from his thoughts. Just hearing her acknowledging him and not immediately kicking him out of her cell lifted a load of tension from his weary body. Maybe they had a chance. Maybe he had a chance.

"Hey," he finally responded, not knowing what else to say. 'Sorry' crossed his mind, but the word just wouldn't come out, like his mouth knew it wouldn't be enough.

"Thought you weren't sleepin' in no damn cage."

Daryl cringed, mentally kicking his own ass for being such an idiot. "Yeah, guess I wasn't thinkin'," he made a feeble attempt at an apology. The tiny grin that crossed her face told him it just might have worked. But then, Beth had the kindest heart he'd ever met. Hell, he was probably forgiven without him even having to ask for it.

God, he was an ass. She really did deserve so much better than someone like him.

He had to make it right. He had to be better. For her. For their baby.

"You mind sharin' a bunk, or you gonna make me sleep on the floor or climb up on top?" He thanked his lucky stars that his verbal filter was clearly still in place, because just the mention of climbing on top had his dick conjuring up some not-so-innocent ideas in his mind.

She answered him by scooting closer to the edge, making a bigger space for him against the wall. His face must have shown his confusion. "I have to sleep on my side anyway, and I'll probably be up a couple times during the night to pee. Don't want to wake you up."

Even after everything, she was putting his getting rest over her own comfort. Christ, he needed to be better for her.

He carefully crawled into the spot she'd made for him, resting his hand on her hip, silently asking for permission before sliding his arm around her. After a moment, she held his hand before moving it down to her side, where a strong kick immediately met his palm. She pushed his hand against the spot, explaining it was a little game she played with their baby. "He's running out of room in there," she whispered, and he could hear the smile in her voice, the same brilliant smile that shined whenever she talked about their baby. He couldn't help but grin and breathe out a laugh against Beth's cheek when their baby kicked his hand again.

She turned her head to face him, her eyes a bright blue even in the fading light, and he found himself easily getting lost in them. He wished he could give her more. Even though finding the prison had been a godsend, and the group had high hopes about making this their permanent home, he knew it was woefully inadequate for what she needed, let alone what she deserved.

Rick's words kept circling in his mind. Make it right.

Slowly, so slowly, unsure she'd even allow him to try, he lowered his lips to hers, finally pressing them together. He honestly couldn't remember the last time he'd kissed her, or held her in his arms like this. Now that he'd finally found his way back to this point, he couldn't think of anything that could possibly pull him away again.

Other than his own bullheaded stupidity.

Taking a chance, he moved to deepen their kiss, surprised and relieved when she opened to him, teasing his tongue with hers. His hands began to wander up her side, caressing her beautiful curves. When they broke their kiss to catch their breaths, Beth's inhale turned into a heavy yawn.

"Oh my goodness," she said softly. He could hear her blush, even though he couldn't see much of anything in the growing darkness. "I'm so sorry...I am just beat."

Truth be told, Daryl was next to dead on his feet anyway, and wasn't sure he'd have the stamina to act out any of the ideas dancing in his mind now that Beth was back in his arms, so warm and supple. She felt like she belonged there with him. He wanted her, no doubt about it, but realized that they both needed rest more than they needed sex.

So instead of persisting, he just nodded, gave her one last, soft kiss before settling down behind her. He left his arm to drape over her side, pulling her as close to him as he could before letting his hand rest on her belly. She placed her hand over his, guiding him to where their baby moved within her.

They were both fast asleep in minutes.

.oOo.

When Daryl woke the next morning, he found himself disappointed to realize that Beth was already gone. Her side of the bed still held traces of her warmth on the scratchy sheets, so he figured she couldn't be too far off. He looked toward the large windows that lined the cell block and realized he'd slept much later than he'd planned. Usually an early riser, Daryl

figured he probably needed the extra hour or so of rest, and Beth had moved cautiously enough to afford him that. He sat up and stretched his back after what was probably the best sleep he'd had since the night at the CDC. What was that - eight, nine months ago? It felt like forever.

He shoved his feet into his boots, shouldered his crossbow, and made his way to the common area, where he found the members of the group gathered, Beth included. He walked up to stand behind her as she spoke with her sister and father. They both greeted Daryl, and he nodded in return. Beth turned, not having noticed that he'd joined them, and smiled brightly up at him.

Before much more could be said, Rick rallied the troops after they had finished a meager breakfast, the same crew that cleared the yard prepared to go through the halls that connected to the other blocks of the prison to see if they could find the infirmary or the cafeteria. Hershel approached them as they were gearing up, fastening a kevlar vest as he walked. Daryl had his doubts about Hershel joining their so-called hunting party, but he wasn't about to tell the older man that. Truth be told, anyone in their group could easily hold their own against most things this world could throw at them - living in the wilderness for months on end had taught all of them the survival skills they needed, and quickly.

Hershel's older daughter, however, was certainly one to speak her mind, trying her damndest to convince her father not to come along. "And if you find the infirmary, what then?" Hershel countered. "You're just going to bring everything? You can only carry so much, and there's the cafeteria to consider, as well. Admit it, you need me to decide what medical supplies are needed most and what can wait for a second trip." Hershel knew he'd won the argument before he started, and Daryl had to stifle a chuckle when Maggie clenched her jaw when she realized her father's point outshone hers.

"Be careful," Beth said softly as he loaded his crossbow. Daryl bit back any snarky remark and simply nodded. He felt a rush of...something he couldn't define...when she let her soft hand rest on his bicep, then lifted herself on her tippy toes to press a quick kiss to his cheek, her belly bumping into his side. He watched, half-stunned, as she looked up at him once more, feeling a new, stronger connection forging between them before she made her way to wish good luck to the rest of the team.

Daryl let out a shaky breath. His heart was pounding and he felt a slight tremor run through his body. What the fuck...was he nervous? He'd been on countless scouting missions since the world ended and the dead started walking, each one equally important to the group's survival, so he couldn't understand why he should be nervous about this one. Was it because there was so much at stake, and so much unknown about what was hiding in each winding corridor? That they would be going through a dark maze with no exit in sight?

What if something happened that prevented him from coming back to Beth? Or even if he did come back, but was no longer able to take care of her? Maybe he wasn't sure just where he and Beth stood in their relationship.

Holy shit, did he just acknowledge that they were in an actual relationship? Like...boyfriend-girlfriend? Is that what they were? She definitely meant more to him than just being a baby

mama. He supposed he'd better get used to the idea, seeing as how their baby would be making his grand appearance basically any day now.

Was *that* why he was so nervous? Knowing that he was about to be an actual father, not just a baby daddy?

The thing of it was, it felt like more than just nerves. It was something...deeper. Something with meaning.

Knock it off, Dixon. You ain't got time for that emotional shit right now.

Daryl mentally shook himself, and followed Rick into the dark labyrinth of the C block.

.oOo.

Of course everything went to shit. Why wouldn't it?

The whole plan ended up being a total bust. Before they found so much as a broom closet, Maggie and Glenn got swarmed then separated from the group, which led to Hershel getting bit, then Rick doing an emergency amputation on the older man's leg to keep the virus from spreading to the rest of his body.

And if that wasn't bad enough, Daryl discovered they weren't alone in the prison. Five men - prisoners, judging by the grungy blue coveralls they wore - had been hiding out in the cafeteria, where Hershel had ultimately lost the lower part of his leg.

He let the others deal with getting Hershel back to the cell block. Daryl's one focus was keeping these five strangers from getting too close to the rest of the group...most importantly, too close to Beth. While he hadn't seen any of them following, he trusted his gut feeling that they were close, and that it'd only be a matter of time before they found their way to the cell block. Any one of them that tried to get past him were going to catch a bolt to the head, no questions.

Daryl had warned them to stay back, that they'd been pardoned by the great state of Georgia, keeping his bow trained on the man who was arguing the loudest. Things had just started to get heated when Rick came back, his hands still bloody from taking care of Hershel, and did his best to keep the peace, explaining to these newcomers what society was like outside the prison walls now that the world had ended.

None of the prisoners seemed to believe what Rick, Daryl and T-Dog had been telling them, so the three led them outside to the section of the yard they had just cleared the day before. The five men blinked as they stepped into the sun. Apparently it was their first time being outside in close to ten months.

The prisoner with the long hair, Tomas, argued that it was their prison, that they were there first. Daryl was impressed at the testicular fortitude Rick had telling Tomas and his group exactly where they could stick that idea. Daryl suggested they just leave, trying to keep these criminals as far away as possible from the rest of the group, away from Beth.

Truth be told, he was trying to come up with a plan to just kill them all and be done with it. Yeah, it was three against five, but Tomas had the only weapon on their side, while he, Rick and T-Dog were armed to the teeth. There was a tiny voice pleading with him to find another way. He didn't want to admit how much that voice sounded like Beth.

The two groups eventually came to an agreement - half of their food stores in exchange for helping to clear out another cell block of their own for them to stay. After the three of them tried explaining how exactly to take down the walkers and arming them with crowbars and axes, they started down the dark corridor leading to the next available block.

When the first handful of walkers approached, Tomas and his group rushed in like it was a prison riot, using hidden shanks and stomping on any walkers they'd knocked down, making it glaringly obvious none of them had been listening to the advice given to them. Once Daryl, Rick and T-Dog put all the walkers down, they went over...again...the new rules for hand to hand combat. Stay in formation. Go for the brain.

The next confrontation with walkers went much better, though the one called Big Tiny had gotten separated, then got himself scratched. Rick was in the middle of explaining to the rest that there was nothing to be done to save him when Tomas beat the man's brains in, and definitely using more violence than was strictly necessary, especially if these men were supposed to be some kind of friends. When he finally finished, there was an evil gleam in his eye that Daryl and Rick both knew not to trust. "Just give me a signal," Daryl offered to Rick.

Every corner they turned, every hall they cleared of walking corpses, Daryl found himself hoping for another and another, just to put more space between these five strangers and Beth. As far as he was concerned, there weren't enough locked doors between her and them. He didn't trust a single one of them.

Rick's signal came when they'd reached the last set of doors leading to the prisoners' new home. Even though it was clear there were several walkers on the other side of the double doors, and Rick had warned him to open one door to control how many came in at a time, Tomas threw both doors wide open, letting the walkers swarm in at the seven remaining men. Instead of a controlled encounter, it was an all out every man for himself fight to survive.

Out of the corner of his eye, Daryl noticed Tomas taking a swipe at Rick with his pickaxe, then pushing a walker at him, sending both Rick and the walker to the floor. Daryl rushed over to save his friend, and saw a look of pure rage in Rick's eyes. He'd take that as a pretty clear signal to take Tomas out.

Once all the walkers were put down, Rick confronted Tomas, agreeing that "shit happens," before burying his machete in Tomas' brain then chasing the shorter of the prisoners, Andrew, when he bolted and ran down the hall. Daryl and T-Dog stayed with the remaining two, Axel and Oscar. Rick came back alone, murder still blazing in his eyes. Axel and Oscar were spared (and Daryl had to agree, they were probably decent guys who just made some crappy choices in life to end up in prison. Had Merle been so different?)

Rick led them into the empty D cell block, finding only what was left of any prisoners that had been assigned to those cells. They'd all been taken out, execution style, their bodies left to rot on the concrete floor. Rick left them with a "take it or leave it." Daryl felt he needed to

let these men know that as bad as this situation seemed right now, it was much worse out on the road. He thought again of Merle, how he could have been in prison for any number of things, and added, "I'm sorry about your friends." With that, he followed Rick through the gloomy corridors back to the C block.

When they returned to the cell block, they learned that Hershel was alive, but on thin ice. He'd been handcuffed to the frame of the bunk beds in his cell to make sure that if he did end up turning, he wouldn't be a danger to anyone. Lori, Carl, Carol and Maggie had been watching over him when Daryl walked in, with Glenn standing in the opening to the cell. Daryl assumed Beth would have been there, so her absence immediately had him edge.

He went to the cell they shared last night only to find it empty. Tamping down the anger rising in him - at her for wandering off, at the others for letting her - he quickly searched the rest of the block until he found her at a table in the common area leading to the cafeteria. Had she been there when they'd come through mere moments ago and he missed her? Was he that lost in his thoughts?

"Hey," he offered, relieved when she greeted him with a sad smile. "What 'chu doin'?"

She sighed heavily, one hand resting atop her belly, the other supporting her lower back as she tilted her head back to stretch her neck. "Takin' a break."

"From what?"

Beth tilted her head toward the storage area where they had just brought in the food from the cafeteria. "Sorting through everything, taking stock." She held up a hand to stop Daryl's rebuttal, "Don't worry, I didn't lift anything bigger than a can of corn. I was just writing it all down so we can plan and ration." Sure enough, laying on the table in front of her was her worn journal, sitting open to a long list in her curly handwriting. They had more food than Daryl had realized. Now that there were only two others sharing the prison rather than five, he wondered what that meant for the rest of the food stores. Beth pulled him from his thoughts, as her eyes welled with tears, "You know what Daddy says, we all got jobs to do."

With that she hung her head, curling in on herself, and began quietly crying. At a loss, Daryl crouched next to her at the table and rested his hand on her shoulder, giving a gentle squeeze. Her delicate hand came up to hold his, squeezing his fingers back. "Hey, c'mon now," he said softly. He tried calming her, saying words he wasn't sure he truly believed, "Yer dad's a tough sumbitch. This ain't gonna..."

"You should have heard her, Daryl," Beth interrupted, a bite of anger cutting through the sadness in her voice. "I had just stepped out to pee *again*, and when I came back, she was in there with Daddy, telling him it's okay to let go, that he doesn't have to fight." She turned her teary eyes to look directly into his. "She gave up on him. Even though the bleeding stopped and Carl went and found the infirmary and Carol could actually treat his wound...she didn't even give him a chance to fight before giving up on him."

Daryl sighed heavily. While he admired Beth's steadfast hope, he could certainly understand Maggie wanting to prepare for the worst. It wasn't like the universe had been sending them a ton of good news lately. The odds of Hershel surviving an amputation like that in the middle

of the damn apocalypse was slim, at least as far as Daryl guessed. And that was if doing so had stopped the virus from spreading in the first place.

Beth pulled Daryl from his thoughts as she stood up and started pacing...well, waddling back and forth. "And then he stopped breathing. Just for a couple seconds. But she just stood there. I couldn't get to him, but even if I could, I wouldn't know how to do CPR on him." Daryl watched her as she continued, the news of Hershel's brush with death coming as quite a surprise. "Lori moved Maggie out of the way and brought him back." She stopped and looked at him. "She saved him, Daryl. While I stood by helpless and Maggie just...stood. Like she knew she was right and wasn't gonna do anything to help." She tilted her head back again, taking a low, deep breath and supporting her lower back again.

Once she calmed herself down again, she continued in a soft voice, "Daddy always taught us to have faith, and here she is already telling him it's okay to let go, watching him die right in front of her..." She finally stopped her pacing and turned her sad, blue eyes on him, a single tear streaming down her cheek.

She just looked so damn helpless, standing there and looking to him for hope, for support, for something he wasn't sure he could give. He cautiously walked toward her and carefully pulled her into his arms. She let him hold her, dropping her forehead to his chest. Not knowing what else to do, he slowly rubbed his hand up and down her back, hoping to bring her at least some comfort. She released a long sigh, "Am I stupid for...for believing he'll pull through this?" she mumbled against his shirt

"Nah," he answered. Truth be told, Daryl didn't think the old man had a snowball's chance at surviving, even if Rick had acted quickly enough to stop the virus from spreading, but he sure as hell wasn't about to tell Beth that. It wasn't lying, per se, just...sparing her feelings. She already had so much to deal with. To learn that Daryl was more inclined to take her sister's side in things? Nope. Not gonna happen.

Instead he guided her back into the kitchen storage and found some stale crackers and a jar of peanut butter. It was a meager meal for them to share, just enough to tide them over for a while, but he wouldn't have to leave her side, and that seemed most important in that moment.

They returned to the cell block, checking in on Hershel again. The entire group was inside his cell, or at least hovering in the doorway. When T-Dog noticed them approaching, he made room for Beth to enter, letting her sit on the stool beside Hershel's cot. When she did, Daryl saw everyone tense as the older man's breathing changed. He swore Hershel's mouth was moving, trying to open and close. Daryl took half a step toward Beth, ready to yank her out of harm's way. He looked back to see Hershel's eyes blink open, expecting to see them clouded over with death. To say he was surprised to see the same bright, clear blue eyes from before, searching the crowded room in confusion rather than hunger, was a severe understatement.

He made it. He survived. Beth had been right this whole time.

And Daryl hadn't trusted her enough to agree with her. Yet he had been pissed that she didn't trust him.

He waited just outside the cell door as Beth took her father's hand in hers, her face filled with a bright smile and happy tears. Rick removed the handcuffs, signaling to the rest of the group that, according to him, the worst was over. After a few more tears and a chorus of I-knew-you'd-make-its and we're-so-glad-you're-okays, Hershel announced in a soft voice that he was pretty tuckered out, and fell once more into a gentle sleep.

It was as if the group let out a collective sigh. The tension in the room dissipated and, one by one, everyone went on their way. What Beth had said about the old man was right - they all had jobs to do. Lori and Carol went toward the kitchen storage to plan their next meal, Rick and T-Dog set about finding a way to cook said meal with Carl in tow. The Greene sisters and Glenn and Daryl stayed near Hershel's cell, keeping vigil as he slept.

Beth refused to leave her father's side. "Just in case," was all she gave as an explanation. Daryl played along, not wanting to argue with the pregnant woman. He brought her a bowl of food and hid his smile as she scarfed it down, biting back his question if she'd actually tasted any of it.

After what seemed like hours, the light coming from the large windows of the cell block turned golden, then dimmed into a light purple hue. As Daryl watched over her, he could see Beth's stamina fading, her eyes dropping in the growing darkness. He figured enough was enough, and insisted she come with him to catch some sleep. She stood slowly, her hands supporting her lower back as she stretched and groaned, complaining lightly about uncomfortable chairs. Daryl teased her, reminding her just where they were, that it wasn't likely they'd give prisoners upholstered armchairs. She giggled and gave him a playful shove as they walked slowly down the row of cells to their own.

She plopped onto the mattress with as much grace as she could muster, leaning back on her hands to take the pressure off her back, and toed off her boots with a low groan.

Daryl sat beside her, scooting back to lean against the cinderblock wall and patting the mattress beside him, silently suggesting she should do the same. Once she was in place, he gently took her feet and laid them across his lap.

Now, Daryl spent very little time around pregnant women...or any women for any amount of time, for that matter. But he'd seen enough movies and heard enough stories to recognize that it was wise to keep his mouth shut about how swollen her ankles were looking and simply enjoyed the comforting silence between them. He gave his best attempt at a foot rub, and though it might have been his first, Beth certainly seemed to enjoy, or at least appreciate it.

At one point, she moved her feet so she could rest her head on his shoulder, and in minutes she was softly snoozing. He took this rare opportunity to just...look at her. Admire all the changes her body had gone through. He'd admit, his attention was drawn first to her chest, which had more than doubled in size since he'd first found her. But when he took in the whole picture, he was dumbstruck by her beauty.

It still bothered him that she thought he would ever be stupid enough to step out on her. He was sure that, in the world from before, she could have had any guy she wanted. Now she was stuck with him, an old redneck nobody. She was so far out of his league, he wasn't sure they were even playing the same sport, and yet she was still so insecure.

He could have cursed himself when his snort of a derisive laugh roused her from her nap. She blinked up at him through sleepy eyelashes and gave a shy smile. “Hi,” she murmured.

“Hi,” he said back, and that same feeling from before when she was wishing him luck came rushing back, rocking his system. It was like some invisible connection was wrapping around his chest, to the point that his heart was pounding right up against his ribcage, and pulling him closer and closer to Beth. Like he never wanted to leave her side. His pulse spiked and dropped at the same time when her eyes met his like that. Those bright blue eyes so full of hope and warmth and...

“Feel better?”

Beth stretched as much as she could on the tiny bunk bed mattress. “Yeah, a little,” she said with a sleepy smile before pulling him toward her to press a kiss to his cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered. He swore he could see tears welling up in those blue eyes of hers again.

Man, Rick wasn’t kidding. These pregnancy hormones really were a bitch to deal with. Had she been like this the whole time, but he’d been too busy making sure they survived to notice?

Beth excused herself, taking one last trip to the potty before crawling back into bed and snuggling right up next to him. Daryl stretched out on the bed, and let his mind start to relax. With several sets of locked doors between them and the dangers outside, Hershel closer and closer to being in the clear, and the hurt and distrust between Beth and himself fading into nothing, Daryl’s mind was finally at ease.

Well, as much as he could allow it to be. In this new world, Daryl would always be waiting for the other shoe to drop, especially with Beth being so close to the end of her pregnancy.

He suddenly felt the urge to have her as close to him as possible, so he maneuvered his arm around her until his hand landed on her hip to scoot her toward him. Her head naturally fell against his chest, like that part of his body was made for her comfort, like she was made to fit perfectly against him. He kissed the crown of her head, like it was the most natural thing in the world to do so.

Maybe it was.

Chapter End Notes

The good news is the next chapter is already written and will be posted next week.

Thank you so much for reading - please take a moment to leave a comment!

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

The group begins their first full day in their new home with a sense of hope...until it all goes downhill.

Chapter Notes

What? A new chapter and it only took a week? Man, look at me go.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Daryl jolted awake, and judging by the barely lit sky, it was still over an hour before dawn. He groaned and let his eyes drift back shut until he realized he had a lot more room on the mattress than he remembered. He bolted upright, smacking his head on the underside of the bunk above him, and muttered several choice words. He was still sitting on the edge of the bed, rubbing the sore spot on his head when Beth reappeared, her face immediately showing concern when she saw him. “What happened?” she whispered.

“Smacked my head on the damn bunk,” he grumbled. Even in the dim light, he didn’t miss Beth’s tiny smirk as she sat down next to him.

“Poor baby,” she said with a pout that fought with her smile. She reached up and gently guided his head lower so she could plant a kiss, somehow knowing exactly where it smarted the most. “You gonna be okay?”

Daryl scowled half-heartedly at her. “I’m fine,” he said as he moved to lay back down.

Beth followed suit, then brushed his shaggy hair away from his already drowsy eyes. “I dunno...maybe I shouldn’t let you sleep, in case you have a concussion.”

Opening one eye, partially to glare at her, partially to see if she was being serious, he growled out, “Shut up,” before wrapping his arm around her back and pulling her into him. He let his arm drift back until his hand was resting on her baby bump between them. “You still doin’ okay?” he asked, all teasing and grumping aside. The past day hadn’t been easy on anyone, but especially not her, and he knew all that stress couldn’t be good for her or the baby.

“Yeah,” she smiled, meeting his hand on her belly and moving it to where there was more noticeable movement. “See? We’re fine.” She shifted a little, bouncing the cot on its weak springs. “Sorry. Haven’t been able to get comfy.”

“Can’t imagine why not,” Daryl teased. She laughed softly beside him, her warm breath ghosting over his face and neck. He moved his hand again, tracing random patterns along her belly then moving to her back, letting his fingertips trail up and down in a leisurely rhythm. She readjusted, but there was something different about it this time. Her legs were suddenly restless, rubbing against each other like a cricket in July.

Wait. Was she...?

Not wanting to embarrass her by actually asking, Daryl kept his same relaxing tempo until his hand rested at the nape of her neck and gently pulled her forward to plant a kiss to her plump lips. How had he forgotten how sweet she tasted?

Beth reacted immediately, kissing him back and opening to deepen their kiss like she had been craving it. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and soon they couldn’t get enough of each other. Like all the nights they’d been missing each other, the endless moments they’d spent thinking about each other, were all saving up for this long-awaited reunion.

Their hands seemed to move of their own volition, searching, seeking each other, making up for lost time in a frenzied scramble to find one another. When he slid his palm up her side, moving slowly toward her breast, Beth pulled away from their kiss as she arched against him, pushing herself into his hand, and she pressed her thighs together tightly. Her delicate gasp and sigh was music to Daryl’s ears. He chanced a gentle squeeze, knowing she’d complained about being sore before. Her whispered moan wordlessly told him to continue. His thumb traced back and forth across her nipple, and he noticed a wetness growing there.

Oh. *Oh.*

He pulled his hand away quickly, “Shit, Beth, I’m sorry.”

She stopped his hand from moving, her very touch calming him. “It’s okay. It’s been happening more and more. I probably should have warned you, but it felt...so...good,” she explained, pressing kisses to his lips between her words.

Daryl wasn’t sure what to do next. He wasn’t about to lie to himself and say he wasn’t the least bit curious to suck on her leaky nipples. Hell, she seemed into it, but he had more important things on his mind at the moment. Instead he ran his hand back down her side, cupping her ass and pulling her toward him, moving her thigh to rest on top of his own.

“Oof!” she exclaimed as quietly as she could manage. They both looked at the bump between them, and she giggled. “Well, that’s not going to work.”

Daryl scoffed, “Yeah, no kidding.” He ran through the different positions they could try given their...limitations...finally deciding on one that would work for both of them in the crowded lower bunk. “Roll over,” he said, gently pushing her hip toward the edge of the bed. She followed his instruction, not without giving him a look that said, “What the hell are you doing?” as she did so. Once they were situated, he reached around her, moving his hand under her shirt to cup her breast, carefully this time, not wanting to embarrass her, and curling up to her, pressing himself to her and wrapping his other arm under and around her.

It about threw Daryl for a loop when she arched her back and pressed her ass right against his crotch, knowing full well she could feel how hard he was for her already. His hand roamed along her body, down her side to her hip, back up over her belly, before finally resting between her thighs, cupping her gently. Beth let out a soft sigh and rocked her hips against his hand.

He kissed along her neck and shoulders, her scent and the feel of her in his arms both stimulating and relaxing him simultaneously. He rocked against her, their rhythms matching effortlessly. He slowly pulled his hand from her, only to slide under the waistband of the sweats she'd taken to wearing lately, even despite the growing heat of late spring. He played along the lips of her pussy with his fingers, tracing through the nest of curls that covered them.

After another grind of her hips against him, which he took as a sign that she wanted him to go further, he slipped his middle finger between her lips, feeling the growing wetness there. He rubbed the pad of his finger against her clit, earning him a choked off groan from the beautiful woman in his arms. "Shh," he reminded her, "Gotta stay quiet, sweetheart." He swirled a finger around her swollen nub, and chuckled when she turned her head to groan into their pillow.

He didn't want to tease her for too long, and not just because he could hardly wait to be inside her again. In reality, he wanted to get her off first, feel her cum on his fingers. Really play up the "making up for lost time" without actually saying the words.

Daryl had a fleeting thought about whether or not it was safe to go much further than this, but didn't want to show his ignorance by asking her. He'd seen enough porn in his day to be fairly certain that pregnant women could have sex without being too concerned. Still, he didn't want her to feel obligated to do something if she was uncomfortable in any way. "You okay?" he murmured in her ear.

Beth turned her head, grinning lazily up at him from over her shoulder. "Yeah, I'm good," she whispered before plucking another kiss from his lips. He chased her mouth with his, their teeth clacking together before finding their rhythm again. Daryl pulled his hand out of her pants to reposition her leg until it bent slightly backwards to rest on his. Once he returned his hand to where it had been, he found the desired effect - her pussy was no longer hiding between her thighs, but open for him to plunge his finger into. His kiss swallowed her moan as he curled his finger against her walls, and again when his thumb found her clit again.

"That feel good?" he whispered against her lips. She answered with a nod, biting her bottom lip to hold back another moan of pleasure. "You want more?" he asked, already pulling his finger from her to add another, then resumed stroking her clit with his thumb.

His dick had grown harder than it had been in months...really, since the last time they'd slept together. He wanted nothing more than to bury himself in her, to show her just how much he missed her, how he wanted her - how he always wanted her - but more than that, he wanted to prove himself to her, to show her he didn't want anyone but her.

Still, a man can only hold out so long. His body took over momentarily, and ground himself against her ass, letting her know just how ready he was for her. She let out a whimper, soft as

a dove's cry, that had him rocking against her again, seeking that friction he so desperately craved.

"Daryl," she whispered as she reached behind his head to tangle her fingers in his hair, almost pulling it from its roots.

"What, Beth?" He kissed along her neck, her jaw line, until he found her lips again. "Tell me." Whatever she wanted, whatever she needed, he would gladly give to her.

"Wait," she finally managed to get out.

Daryl's blood ran cold. Had he hurt her? Gone too far? Was it something with the baby? He pulled away from her instantly, propping himself up on his elbow to look at her, to see the expression on her face.

Beth looked up at him, almost guiltily. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "All I can think is, 'What if someone walks by?'"

His first thought was to tell anyone who happened to see them to fuck all the way off, but after a half second to let some of his bloodflow return northward, he raced to find a solution. Yeah, he could throw a blanket over her, but something told him she'd want more privacy than that. He wasn't about to drag her out of bed to go traipsing through the dark halls of the prison in search of an office or something.

So. He'd do the next best thing. "Alright," he grunted, unwrapping himself from around her. "Lemme up," he told her, scooting to the foot of the bed. As he stood, he grabbed the pillow and moved it to the foot of the bed. Then he unbuckled his belt and undid his pants, partly to relieve the discomfort of his fly pressing so tightly against his dick, and partly to save time later. He approached her side of the bed, nodding his head to show Beth where he wanted her.

Following his lead, she scooted closer to the wall, and Daryl grabbed a blanket that would be big enough to cover both of them and arranged it on the bed before climbing in, taking her spot. Now if anyone happened to get nosy, they'd only see his back and little else.

Once she was settled and he'd slid his arm around her again, he began nuzzling along her jawline, down her neck, nipping at her collarbone and beyond, while his other hand cupped her cheek gently, tempting and teasing her, savoring every gasp and breathy moan as his hand slid down her delicate throat to her chest. He loved the feel of her under his palm, how she moved against him, always searching for more, so unlike the first time they'd been together.

With literally anyone else, he'd try his damndest to keep them at arm's length at least. Daryl Dixon didn't cuddle. He didn't make out. Hell, in his former life before the turn, foreplay was just a means to an end. Get the girl wet enough so it wasn't uncomfortable, and it was off to the races.

But now, with Beth, he finally understood the appeal and found he couldn't get enough. He couldn't wait for the opportunity to take her somewhere private, somewhere safe...

somewhere he could take his time finding out each and every way of making her moan and scream in ecstasy. And to do all of that *before* he even got his dick wet.

Not now, though, he reluctantly reminded himself. Now he was racing against time before someone inevitably woke up and came looking for them. And to give themselves as much time as they could before that happened, he'd have to keep her quiet, all while giving as much pleasure as he possibly could.

But one day...one day.

His hand found its way back between her legs, circling her clit until her legs parted themselves, giving him access to her delicate folds once more. He pushed himself against her hip and slid two fingers inside her, finding her hotter and wetter than even just a moment ago.

As he curled against her innermost walls again, Beth scrambled, stretching herself to seek out his mouth, groaning as she sealed his lips to his, pouring her passion directly into him. She pulled away, gasping for breath, "Dary, please..." Her voice was a throaty whisper. "Please... I want you."

Her whispered confession made his cock throb, beads of precum forming on the tip to stain his underwear. With renewed vigor, he doubled his efforts, scissoring his fingers inside her to make sure she was more than ready for him. "Cum for me, girl," he all but growled against her throat before catching the shell of her ear between his teeth. "Can't wait to hear you scream again...wanna fuck that pussy til you can't walk straight."

He felt her walls begin to flutter around his fingers, and knew it was only a matter of time before he'd feel her fall apart for him. "Ya like that, huh? Like me talkin' dirty to ya?" Beth only nodded, biting down on her bottom lip and pushing her hips against his hand. He unleashed all the thoughts he'd been holding back these past months, unveiling the visions he found in his dreams about her. "Wanna see you bouncin' on my cock, lettin' me suck on those sweet titties."

Any other thoughts in his sex-starved brain were pushed away at the sight of Beth mid-orgasm, her head thrown back, mouth stretched wide in a silent scream, her back arched, pushing her breasts to his greedy gaze. Her strong legs had locked his hand in place between them so tightly he couldn't push or pull anymore, so he milked her orgasm, keeping the same steady rhythm but lightening up on the pressure. He knew she was about through it when her legs finally relaxed, falling apart once again. Daryl wasted no time in removing his hands and bringing his fingers to his mouth, licking her arousal from them. She tasted incredible, and if they'd had more time and privacy, he'd drink right from the source.

One day...one day.

Instead, he leaned over to kiss her, wondering if she could taste herself on his tongue, what she thought. Any other time, he'd be all ears, but at this particular moment, the blood flowing to his brain was in severe decline - it was his other head that was running the show now.

When Beth tried cuddling toward him, wrapping her arms around his neck as they kissed, he gently pushed her back to the mattress. He understood the look of confusion on her face, and

certainly couldn't blame her, but words were not exactly forthcoming. He used gentle hands to push her, turn her toward the wall, so he was spooning her. His cock was nestled against the curve of her ass, already seeking entrance. Once Daryl was sure the blanket was securely covering both of them, he reached underneath and quickly found the waistband of her sweatpants, pushing them down past her hips and toward her thighs.

Beth looked back at him over her shoulder, startled and obviously unsure of what his intentions were. He tried giving her a reassuring grin as he continued to work her pants further down her legs. "Don't worry," he whispered as he moved further down the bed to let his cock rest behind her legs instead of her ass. "I ain't tryin' *that* ." He kissed her upper arm and moved his hips from behind her, sliding himself back and forth in the wetness still there between her thighs. "Tell me to stop, and I will."

He palmed himself, giving a few pumps of his hand before lining himself up in the cleft of her pussy, not entering her, not yet, but teasing her, letting her get used to the sensation, the idea, and gauging her reaction. If she showed the slightest bit of discomfort or, god forbid, fear, he'd be up and across the room in a heartbeat.

To his surprise, and relief, he felt her moving against him, ever so slightly as she found her rhythm, arching her ass toward his hips and lifting her top leg to allow him to slide without resistance. He slid his hand along her thigh, over her hip to her ribcage, relishing in the feel of her body against his, making sure to keep his rhythm slow and steady. Her hand found his and brought it over her hip to find her center once again. "You ready?" he asked before making one more move.

"Yeah," she whispered. "Just...go slow, okay?"

He nodded against her back, grabbing the base of his cock and lining himself up with her entrance, sliding the tip in. Daryl felt her move at the sensation, but she immediately relaxed, which he took as a sign to go further. She was impossibly tight, despite his ministrations from earlier, but she didn't seem to be in any kind of discomfort as he pushed into her, filling her, stretching her. He kissed the nape of her neck as he bottomed out inside her, his hips fitting snugly against her ass. Trailing kisses across her shoulder, his hand wandered up and down her body, enjoying the changes that motherhood had brought to her body as he rocked slowly with shallow thrusts. "Shit, Beth," he murmured against her skin, "you feel so fuckin' good."

The sound of his name riding along her soft moans made him want to let loose, to stop holding back. He'd promised he'd go slow, and by God he was going to keep that promise if it killed him. "You're so big...I...God, Daryl, I feel so full," she whimpered out. Daryl started to pull away from her, but she quickly reached back to hold him in place, her hand landing on his lower back. "Don't you dare stop," she scolded him in a husky voice.

Not daring to disobey, he kept his slow pace, knowing it wouldn't take long for him to finish and he just didn't want this to end, not so soon. "Wouldn't dream of it," he grunted.

His name became her whispered litany among the soft moans he pushed and pulled from her. He kept his hand on her hip, moving them together, guiding her as if they were performing a practiced dance. Beth's hand found his, their fingers threading between each other, squeezing as they each chased their own pleasure. She was panting heavily, no room for words, when

she pulled on his hand to reach between her thighs, showing him exactly how to play with her clit.

“Daryl,” she squeaked out, “Please...more.”

Sweet merciful Jesus, finally, he thought to himself as his hips picked up their pace, giving Beth what she needed, what they both needed. It was damn near impossible to keep quiet as he growled against her back, feeling her inner walls began to quiver. “You gonna cum for me, huh?” he grunted, fucking harder into her, chasing his own release. “Give it to me, girl. Lemme feel that pussy squeeze my dick.”

After a few more staggered thrusts, he felt her clamp down around him, pulling his own orgasm from him, their cell filling with choked moans and sighs. He felt a wetness growing between them, but considering the sheer volume he just poured inside her and how hard she had just come, he wasn't too alarmed. He was sure there were extra sheets somewhere. In fact, he was pretty proud of himself - pretty sure he'd just made his woman squirt, even if it was just enough to wet the sheets.

He pulled out of her as slowly as he could, and felt her gasp and wince as he did. Exhaustion washed over him, but a different kind than he'd been experiencing these last several months. Being on the road had run everyone ragged. And now? Now Daryl was pretty well fucked out. Now was a time to catch their breath and let the afterglow claim them. He moved back up toward the pillow, kissing along Beth's spine as he moved, until she was snug in his arms again, his hand roving over her belly in leisurely patterns.

Maybe it was their rekindled closeness. Maybe it was the stress of the past months...hell, even the past several hours...that were melting away. Maybe it was being so close, yet not facing each other in the still dim light of predawn. Whatever the cause, Beth started speaking to him in hushed tones. “I missed this so much, Daryl. I miss having your hands on me, being together like this. I miss having your arms around me. You don't know how much I missed you.”

Daryl's heart squeezed with guilt, pausing his movements but most assuredly not pulling away. “I...I had to,” he tried to explain.

Beth turned herself enough to be able to see him, resting her palm on his stubbled cheek. “I know you did,” she whispered before pulling him in for a kiss. “And even though it hurt to be so alone, to feel like you were leaving me behind, I still love you for doing it, for keeping us safe.”

He blinked at her stupidly. He remembered, shortly after their attack at the campground, her saying those three fateful words, but they'd both been through so much, and they were both half asleep (at least he thought), that he didn't know if she'd meant it, if she'd meant to really say it, and sure as hell wasn't about to ask her about it, especially not while sharing a car with the Grimes family.

But she'd said it again, and they were definitely both coherent this time. Well, they were both still riding their orgasm highs, but he could hardly ignore the fact that Beth was telling him, once again, that she loved him.

All he could do was stare at her. He didn't want to be the asshole that runs away, but he didn't really know what to say or do. So he just...froze.

Thankfully, Beth sent out a life line. She turned in his arms to face him in the growing light just before dawn, just enough to be able to see that she was looking directly into his eyes. "It's okay," she said softly. "I didn't say it just to hear you say it back. But I do, Daryl." She gave a small smile, rested her palm against his stubbled cheek, and said it again, "I love you."

He was still dumbstruck, but at least she wasn't expecting an answer, so he could just let his mind spiral without having to think of a response. He didn't know if what he felt for her was really love. He'd never been close to any kind of loving relationship in his life.

Apparently he had a lot to think about, to work through in his mind. Because all he had to offer this girl, the mother of his child, was his bull-headed, redneck self. And she loved him anyway.

His heart gave a flutter at the thought. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation.

As his mind did its best to work through everything, he felt Beth's breath against his skin start to even out as she found sleep again. She looked so damn peaceful, so beautiful. He found he couldn't resist pressing a kiss to her forehead, and didn't miss when, even in slumber, she turned her face toward his.

There went his heart again. Maybe he had a medical condition.

Bullshit. He'd been feeling this strange...feeling...for a while, but never had a word to put to it.

Well, there was no getting back to sleep for him. All traces of exhaustion from just moments before had suddenly vanished. Daryl moved as carefully as he could so as not to disturb her, got himself dressed, shouldered his crossbow after shoving his feet into his boots, and found his way outside. It wasn't that he wanted to be away from Beth - far from it, actually. He just needed some fucking air.

When he was with her, he felt calmer, lighter. She made him feel like he was worth a damn, the way she looked at him and smiled at him. Gave a shit about him. Not just because he could hunt and provide protection, like he felt from most of the group. She genuinely cared about him.

And then she went and told him she loved him. No one had ever said those words to him, not even his own mother. But now the most beautiful girl, inside and out, with eyes and smiles that could out-shine the sun...thought she loved him. And had no expectations from him to reciprocate, apparently. What the hell was he supposed to do with that?

God, he wanted a cigarette. Instead he breathed in a lungful of the damp Georgia morning air, trying to sort through his thoughts.

He'd be stupid to push her away. Beth Greene was far too good for him. Hell, he couldn't walk away from her if his life depended on it. She had become his new drug, and damn if he

was already addicted. Even now, in the middle of this emotional crisis, he was sorely tempted to head back inside and curl himself around her in their bed.

So what the hell was he waiting for? If she said it was okay if he didn't...say *it* back...why was he out here dealing with thought and emotions when he could just be wrapped up in her instead of his own head?

But there was something...in his head or in his heart...that kept him from going back inside. Was this what it was like to listen to his conscience? He could certainly do without that mess, thank you very much.

He almost felt like he owed her to say *it* back, just because it was the very least that she deserved. It wasn't fair to let her keep dangling on that line. He just needed to say the words, even if he wasn't sure he meant them the way she did. After everything she'd been through because of him, he owed it to her.

Even as the thought crossed his mind, he knew, he felt, just how wrong that was. He may not have a shit ton of experience with it, but it seemed to him that love shouldn't...couldn't be an obligation. If that were even remotely true, his ma and his old man would have treated him and Merle - hell, they'd have treated each other - a whole helluva lot better.

Beth didn't need lip service from anyone, but especially not from him. She'd probably just call him out on his bullshit anyway.

He sighed heavily, knowing there was far too much to be done rather than trying to figure all of this out all at once.

Daryl took a lap within the fences, especially checking the far corner where the cut chain link was being held together with a wire dog lead. By the time he'd made it back to C Block, he found most of the group was up and moving, heading to the mess hall area where Carol was putting together a simple breakfast for everyone. Beth was waddling slower than usual, both of her hands supporting her lower back. He crossed over to her, heard her puff out a breath before turning a smile toward him as he joined her. "Good morning," she said, her voice a little breathy with the effort of simply walking down the corridor.

"Mornin'" he answered. "You doin' alright?" Now that he was closer to her, he'd swear she looked a little flushed, with tiny beads of perspiration gathering at her hair line. He probably looked the same, but he'd been outside walking around for the better part of an hour.

"Oh, yeah," she waved him off with a dismissive hand before returning it to the small of her back. "Just been a little achy." Daryl wanted to call bullshit, but he was pretty sure arguing with a pregnant woman about how she feels would be a death sentence.

As they ate, Rick was going over the plan for the day, moving vehicles and securing more of the prison. Lori, Beth and Carl would stay with Hershel while the rest would be working outside. As they assessed what all needed to be done, Carol noticed that two able bodies were definitely absent. Rick said something about Glenn taking a shift to keep watch last night.

Come to think of it, Daryl hadn't seen Maggie that morning, either. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out just where and how to find them. He called toward the guard tower. Sure enough, Glenn poked his head out of the doorway, shirtless and buckling his pants closed. A little of the famous Dixon style of crude humor at their expense had the rest of the group smiling and snickering.

Work seemed to go much faster than usual that morning. It was as if things were starting to look up for them all, and they could all loosen up a little knowing they were relatively safe within the fences and brick walls.

That lasted until they noticed Oscar and Axel slowly coming around the corner of their own cell block out into the yard. They asked - hell, Axel practically begged - to be able to stay in C Block with the rest of the group, wanting to get away from the so-called ghosts of their former fellow prisoners.

Rick called for a quick meeting out of earshot with the rest of their group. T-Dog was all for welcoming them into the fold, but the others were less accepting of the two men. Daryl probably understood them better than the rest. Hell, most of the people he ran with, Merle and himself included, could have easily ended up behind bars with them. They were degenerates, but not psychos. Just guys after their next high, their next fix, whatever their vice may be.

Did that mean he was willing to let these two come one step closer to where Beth was being kept safe? Hell no. Let them take their chances on the road like their group had done for the past eight months.

Once it was decided, Carol, Glenn and Maggie put together a box of food rations for the week, led them to the next section of fencing, and locked a chain in place with Oscar and Axel on the other side.

Daryl, Rick, and Glenn had gone into the woods surrounding the rear facing side of the prison in hopes of finding some game to hunt and bring back for dinner, but none of them were too keen on being that far from those they cared about for that long. Instead, they set a few traps and collected arm loads of firewood. At least they could provide a warm meal, even if it still came from a can.

As they squeezed their way back through the hole in the fence that they'd cut the other day, Daryl noticed movement coming from the door leading to C Block. Someone had found Hershel a pair of crutches, and he was giving them a test run, accompanied by Carl, Lori, and Beth.

Even from across the prison yard, Daryl could see Beth's smile stretching across her face despite the obvious discomfort she was in that day. Despite the rift in their relationship from months ago, it was clear how much she loved her father, and how relieved she was to have him on the mend. No matter the distance, he was constantly reminded of how beautiful she was, inside and out.

Glenn yelled out a cheer of encouragement to Hershel, which Daryl had to cut short, reminding the younger man to keep quiet as he motioned at the small group of walkers

making their way out of the tree line and toward the fence. He thought it was odd that so many had gathered all of a sudden when they hadn't come across any in the time they'd spent in the woods, but decided not to worry too much about it, not when they were bearing witness to a win as incredible as Hershel's speedy recovery.

The three men watched a moment longer as a peaceful feeling settled over all of them.

They should have known it wouldn't last.

A sudden commotion broke out in the prison yard, causing the three with Hershel to turn and start firing what weapons they had and scattering to the doors leading back inside. Daryl moved without seeing what the threat was, taking off at an instant sprint. A quick glance their way revealed several walkers ambling from a door in E Block. A spike of terror caused a rush of adrenaline, helping him to run faster than he'd ever been able to before. As he ran, he saw Maggie, T-Dog and Carol rushing to help, which should have given at least some relief, except for the voice in his brain chanting in time with each hurried footfall, "It should be me...gotta get to Beth."

Halfway to the end of the perimeter walkway, Rick yelled for Glenn to throw the keys. After a rushed relay, Rick had them in hand, frantically working to unlock the padlock separating them from their families.

As he worked, Daryl looked to see where Beth was. He watched, helpless, as Hershel pushed a walker away with one of his crutches and Beth held a door for her father to follow her inside to the safety of the prison. Okay. Good. They were both smart enough and capable enough to find somewhere to hunker down. Meanwhile, Daryl grew more impatient, hating this helpless feeling as he watched the chaos ahead of him. If Rick took too much longer, he was ready to climb the chainlink to get to Beth, barbed wire be damned.

Once they were through that gate, they rushed toward the next, where Oscar and Axel were standing. Rick pushed through them, hurrying to open the last barrier separating him from his family. Finally the padlock snapped open, and the three of them took off without explaining to the two prisoners what was going on.

By the time they'd made it to the concrete yard, over a dozen bodies were laid out on the ground, none of them belonging to anyone in their group, thank God. Everyone had apparently made it inside safely, and the doors had been shut, keeping all of the walkers out, but keeping the three of them out as well. Glenn noticed that the chains around the gates had been cut, leading Rick to question Oscar and Axel about how this could have happened.

Before he had much of a chance to get answers, a klaxon alarm sounded, catching them all off guard. Rick and Glenn immediately started shooting out the speakers fixed to the prison walls above them, but there were just too many places the deafening noise was coming from. Rick whirled around to find Oscar, demanding to know why the alarms would go off. Oscar explained that there was a back-up generator, that it must be the source of power for the alarms. He'd only worked on it a few times, but he remembered how to get to it, and might be able to figure out how to turn it off.

Once they finally found their way inside, Rick called out for the five men to split into teams, either to find the rest of their people or to find the generator and shut it down. Daryl followed Rick and Oscar through several dark corridors until they made it to the room with the generator, a swarm of walkers hot on their heels. Rick made his way through the room, scanning for whoever might have caused all of this, while Daryl and Oscar blocked the door.

Rick called for Oscar, leaving Daryl on his own to keep the walkers at bay. He heard shouting, sounds of a struggle amid the blaring alarm and the raspy screams of the walkers trying to get in. He pushed against the door with all his might, but felt his shoes slipping on the smooth concrete floor. The door didn't have a latch, and he couldn't hold it closed long enough to lock the deadbolt so he could deal with whatever was happening on the other side of the room.

In a rush of action, Daryl let the undead push the door open, only to take down the first one through with his crossbow, the second with his hunting knife. He pushed the last one back into the hall, buying himself just enough time to engage the deadbolt and make his way to help Rick. All he could hear was someone shouting to "Shoot him!"

A gunshot rang out, and Daryl's blood ran cold. He peered around the corner to see Oscar holding Rick's pistol. A quick glance further around the row of metal cabinets splitting the room in two showed Rick still standing, his hand outstretched toward Oscar, silently asking him to lower his weapon. Daryl was poised and ready to take him out, and was relieved when Oscar turned the handle of the gun toward Rick for him to take his weapon back.

Andrew, the prisoner who had tried to attack them along with Tomas, had been the one to cause all of this chaos. A look at the generator showed significant damage, which Daryl assumed was from the ax laying on the floor.

Shit. Well, there was that.

Rick flipped the switches to turn off the alarm. Now the only thing left to do was to fight their way back into the hall, and find the rest of their people.

They wound their way back through the prison, meeting up with Glenn and Axel again, then pausing only when they found a pair of walkers consuming a fresh body. A wave of emotion washed over him when he realized it was T-Dog, or at least what was left of him. Laying on the ground was the scarf Carol had been wearing around her head earlier that morning, but she was nowhere to be found. Chances were that she'd made it through the rest of the corridors and was back with the rest of the group.

They all finally made it back outside and ran to the place where this had all begun, only to find the same bodies on the ground, but none of their people. Rick turned to face them, ready to give another order, when a baby's cry pierced the air. They all turned, stunned, to see Maggie carrying an infant in a denim shirt, both of them covered in blood. Carl followed stoically behind her, his eyes downcast, unable to meet his father's.

Daryl's heart froze, his stomach somewhere in his throat, as he watched Rick put the pieces together, coming to the realization that his wife was gone, leaving him with a brand new baby to care for. Rick collapsed to the ground, openly sobbing as his grief coursed through him.

Glenn moved to Maggie's side, holding her as she held the baby to her chest. "I had to," she cried. "Lori begged me to...to...she knew she wouldn't make it, but she wanted me to anyway."

Daryl watched, heavy hearted, as Glenn comforted her, pressing a kiss to her temple, whispering something meant only for Maggie, but she shook her head angrily. "No, it was my fault. If Daddy had been there, Lori would still..."

The rest of her words were lost on Daryl's ears. Hershel. Where was Hershel?

More importantly...where the fuck was Beth?

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry!

Except I'm not actually, because the next chapter already has about 1,000 words written, so...there's that. (Though I feel I need to add that tomorrow is my first day back to teach, so I may not be posting next week, but it'll be soon, I promise. I'm too excited about this chapter!

You can yell at me in the comments...

Chapter 19: Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Daryl looks Hershel and Beth after the insider attack on the prison. He finds so much more...

Chapter Notes

Has it really been more than a year since I've updated? I know I tell other writers to never apologize, but you all have been so patient and absolutely deserve an apology. I'm so sorry for leaving you all hanging for so long. I know you don't need my reasons or excuses, so I'll leave them out. Please know I've been kicking myself all year trying to get my butt in gear to figure this chapter out and decide where to go with this and the next. And these guys just weren't cooperating (really it's Carol that's not cooperating, but that's not really a surprise, is it?).

So, thank you, Thank You, THANK YOU for your continued patience! Thank you for the Moonshine Awards for WIP and Best Author of 2024.

I have dreams of finishing this before the year end, but let's all be realistic. I'm working two jobs, and have two boys involved in Scouts and Sports, so while I have the best of intentions...well...you know...

So. I hope you enjoy this chapter. Please let me know what you think in the comments!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Daryl stood frozen to the spot, his blood running cold as realization washed over him. Hershel and Beth had yet to reappear since the sirens had been turned off. He wracked his panic-stricken brain for where he'd seen them last, finally moving toward the entrance he remembered them escaping through. A handful of walkers were crowded around the chain link cage surrounding the platform where he'd last seen them.

The door enclosed by the cage led to a part of the prison they hadn't yet explored, and he wanted to waste no time in getting to Beth as soon as he could. With no bolts left, Daryl began taking the walkers out one by one, not waiting for backup - there was no time. The walking corpses were still preoccupied with getting through the latched gate, so he was able to attack from behind and take them down, one at a time and dragging them a few feet away, without any of the rest of them noticing. Once enough of them had been felled, Daryl stepped back and saw one of Hershel's crutches jamming the gate shut from the inside. Letting out a string of profanities, he gave up on that front, having wasted too much time already on an apparently futile task.

As he moved through the courtyard, he vaguely noticed that Rick had disappeared, with Carl, Maggie, and Glenn along with him. Oscar and Axel were the only two he noticed still outside, both working to clear out the twice dead bodies from the area. Without sparing a word to either of them, Daryl made his way through the nearest entrance. There was no time for niceties, not that he'd spare any for them anyway. He followed the corridors back to the C block, then took a moment to gather his bearings to figure out what end of the prison Beth and Hershel had gone to.

He moved in the general direction of where he'd seen them last, banging on every door he came to, searching every office, closet, and storeroom he could get into, only waiting as long as his patience could hold out for someone to answer before moving on to the next one. Daryl went on, rushing this way and that, trusting his sense of direction to guide him to that same corner of the prison wing where he'd seen Beth last, but when every hallway looked like the next, and very few windows to help keep his bearings, he found himself wishing for a way to mark where he'd already been and what turns he'd already made.

He came to a T intersection and turned right, hoping his inner compass wouldn't fail him now. Looming in the darkness, he could just make out a door at the end of the hall, but it had a push bar on the inside, as opposed to the knobs and handles that all the office doors he'd passed already had. He moved quickly, a sense of hope growing in him. He pushed his way through the door and found himself within the cage that had been closed and locked with Hershel's crutch. Knowing he had to be close, he shoved the door wide open, flooding the corridor with light.

About halfway down the hall, Daryl found a sign that read, "Witness room." Like he'd done countless times already up and down these halls, he tried the door, knocking first then peering in carefully, and saw rows of chairs, half of them still in neat rows, facing a window that lined a second room. The rest of the chairs had been moved, arched around a doorway as if someone had hurriedly tried to create a blockade against anyone or anything that would try to get in.

This wasn't a room to question witnesses. These chairs were set up to witness an execution.

An uneasy feeling filled Daryl's gut as he opened the door wider, wishing for more light to really scope out the Witness Room. After a full minute with no movement at all, he slowly made his way toward the blocked door. Is this where Beth and her father had hidden when the alarms went off? Or was this another group of prisoners hiding out, like the ones they'd found in the cafeteria? Taking a steadying breath and readjusting his knife in his hand, Daryl turned the handle to pull it open, only to find it locked.

Daryl let out another string of curses, banging on the door with his fist and growling in frustration. His eyes stung with unbidden tears, only for a second, before he roughly wiped them away with his knuckle.

As he did, he saw movement, out of the corner of his eye. It was too quick, too fluid to be a walker, but with only the dim light to help him see, Daryl couldn't be sure just who or what he'd seen. Once again, he braced himself to face whatever was beyond that door. Without him pushing on it, the door slowly crept open, letting a faint sliver of light into the viewing room.

Before he could take a step through the doorway, a man was screaming at him and swinging something at him from behind the dividing wall. Daryl quickly jumped back, avoiding being hit and forcing whoever it was to come all the way through the doorway.

Even in the dim light shining from in front of him, he'd know that silhouette anywhere. There before him was Hershel, leaning against the doorframe while holding his remaining crutch like a weapon in front of him. Daryl sheathed his knife and called out, trying to calm the older man, "Hey...hey, it's me...it's Daryl." He held his hands up in a gesture of surrender until Hershel returned the crutch under his arm and steadied himself.

That's when Daryl got a good look at the man; Hershel's normally crisp and clean button down shirt had a large dark spot covering the front. As Daryl's eyes adjusted, he saw that there was blood, so much blood, covering the front of his formerly white button down shirt. A closer look showed a streak of red across his forehead as if it had been wiped there. He glanced down to Hershel's hands and saw them stained crimson. The longer he took in the sight before him, the faster the wheels in his head began to churn together. The same question from before circled in his mind before making its way out of his mouth.

"Where is she?" he demanded, but Hershel didn't answer fast enough. "Where the fuck is Beth?" he all but growled, not willing to admit the possibility that...no...he couldn't even think the words.

"Now, just calm down, son," Hershel used a voice that Daryl assumed was supposed to be calming, but it only pissed him off more.

"No, fuck that," he yelled back, pacing because he had nothing else to do. His entire system had already been flooded with adrenaline for so long now, he felt his knees ready to give out from below him. "What happened to her?" he demanded.

Hershel smiled. He fucking smiled. Daryl was ready to haul off and punch the man until he finally spoke in that same calming voice.

"Beth's fine. And I'll take you to her, but you'll need to calm down a minute before I take you to see her."

.oOo.

Beth was fighting hard, struggling to win against the exhaustion coursing through every inch of her body. It would be easy, so incredibly easy, to just let her eyes drift shut and sleep away how very tired she was.

But there was no way in heaven or hell that she had any desire to close her eyes. Not when her own little miracle was sleeping soundly in her arms.

She gently brushed her finger down a soft cheek, then slid her thumb across a set of the tiniest fingernails she'd ever seen. Her father had found some sheets in a storage cabinet, which they'd used to clean her baby off as best they could.

Her baby. Even though her arms were full of the softest warmth she'd ever felt, and she pressed yet another kiss to the shock of dark hair that matched Daryl's perfectly, it still seemed unreal. The late afternoon light shining through the high windows that lined the walls cast a golden glow around the two of them, as if heaven itself was shining down on them.

Her father had commented how poetic it was that she'd brought forth life at the end of the world, literally in Death Row. They had quite the conversation as her labor progressed. Hershel had asked when contractions had started, and she'd told him she didn't remember feeling them until they went into hiding when the alarms went off. She remembered him frowning at that, saying that it had taken both his wives hours of labor before delivering.

Beth had to think back, remembering her back being sore for the past two days, but had brushed it off, thinking it was just from sitting in uncomfortable chairs while keeping vigil over her father, then from having twisted around the night before.

Suddenly the large wet spot in the bed she shared with Daryl made a lot more sense. She vaguely remembered reading that sex could trigger labor...had their activities the night before made her water break? Had she been in labor and not even known it?

Beth heard the door leading to the block of cells where she was recovering open and shut. She stiffened, the sound of footsteps drawing closer pulling her from her thoughts. She was completely vulnerable to any kind of danger, living or dead. She released a sigh when she heard Hershel announce, "Visitor." The smile was evident in his voice. She looked up to see Daryl peering around the corner of the cell through the iron bars that separated them, as if he was unsure he was allowed, or welcome to enter.

"Hi," she greeted him with a tired smile.

"Hey," he grunted as he made his way to her bedside, sounding like he wasn't sure what to expect.

Had Hershel told him?

"Come meet your son." She readjusted her arms, maneuvering their baby so his father could get a better look.

Daryl moved closer, still moving awkwardly, until he could get a better look. A quiet moment passed between the three of them, their brand new family. Beth whispered, "He's got your nose."

Snorting a laugh through his nose, Daryl joked, "Poor kid." Beth noticed his hands starting to get twitchy, like he wasn't sure what to do with them.

"You wanna hold him?" she asked, keeping her voice soft.

Daryl immediately stood up straight, shaking his head as he took a step back. "I'm all covered in...all kinds of crap," he tried as an excuse.

Hershel, who'd been watching from the entryway into the cell, wasn't about to let him off that easily. "We've got extra sheets down the hall, alcohol wipes you can use to clean up. Even found extra coveralls if you wanna change."

"Ain't holdin' my kid for the first time dressed like a damn prisoner," Daryl growled out, immediately on the defensive.

Beth held out a hand to try to calm him. "Daryl, Daddy didn't mean anything by it. It was just to get you out of your dirty clothes, is all. He's all swaddled up, so he'll be okay. Just cover up with a couple sheets to make sure nothing gets on him, wash your hands, it'll be fine. Right, Daddy?" Hershel nodded, then motioned for Daryl to follow him.

She watched the two men leave for a brief moment before bringing her eyes back to the babe in her arms. She just couldn't get enough of him, couldn't stand to look away for too long. Lost in her thoughts, Beth almost didn't hear when Daryl and her father returned, Daryl wearing a sheet to cover himself from the shoulders down. She giggled a little at the sight; he looked like he was wearing a ghost costume but forgot to cover his head.

As he came nearer, Beth scooted herself over, letting her feet hang over the edge to give him a place to sit on the bed next to her. "Ready?" she asked with a smile, and started to hand her son to meet his father. "Make sure to support his head and his little butt," she gently instructed. In the end, Daryl just held his arms still, ready to cradle the baby, and let Beth position him where he'd be safe and supported.

When Beth took her hands away, Daryl let out a shaky breath. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the sight. A look of awe, wonder, fear and amazement brightened Daryl's face. "He's so tiny," he whispered. "Hey, little guy." Beth's heart squeezed as his voice rose at least an octave from his usual gravelly sound. When Daryl looked over at her, she would swear his eyes looked a little watery, but she knew better than to draw attention to it. "What are we gonna call him?"

With a soft smile, she answered, "I've always liked the name Charlie. Or maybe Daniel."

Daryl laughed a little, "Charlie Daniel, huh?" then looked down at their baby's little face again. "Charlie was my grampa's name. My mom's dad. I remember him an' gramma bein' good people...the couple times we got to see 'em."

Beth smiled up at him. "Well, I think that's a sign then. Alright. Charlie Dixon it is."

Both parents were gazing down lovingly at their son, and at the sound of his brand new name, his eyes blinked open, like he was looking back at them. "Look at that," Daryl whispered, his smile growing wider by the second.

Beth watched as Daryl marveled over their son. The sheet started to slide down his arm, revealing that he'd completely taken his gore-stained shirt off. Something deep down inside her pinged at the sight of his well-muscled arms taking such care to cradle their baby.

When Daryl pulled his eyes away from the bundle in his arms back to her, she could have sworn they were glistening with tears, but she'd never in a million years point that out to him.

Instead, she scooted close to him, so their thighs were resting against each other, and she leaned in, finding herself unable to look away once again. Daryl leaned back toward her, pressing a kiss to her forehead, with a whispered, "He's beautiful...like his mama," before gazing back down at their infant son.

There were plenty of things Beth missed from the time before the world fell apart. Their group was good about finding basic necessities beyond food and water. Things like deodorant and chapstick had become luxuries rather than essentials, but they'd learned to survive just fine doing without.

But man alive, what she'd give to have a camera to capture this perfect moment between father and newborn son.

The tender moment didn't last long before little Charlie began to squirm and squawk. Daryl panicked for a minute, looking to Hershel and herself for some kind of guidance. When it didn't come quickly enough, he started lightly bouncing and rocking the bundle in his arms, shushing him gently. When that didn't work, he used the softest, sweetest voice Beth had ever heard from him. "Hey, little man," he cooed, "It's okay."

When Charlie's cries began to grow louder, Beth leaned over and carefully scooped him out of Daryl's arms. "He's probably hungry," she explained. "He hasn't eaten yet." After a moment of maneuvering and readjusting, he finally latched on and began to drink his first meal.

"Oh...wow." Beth found it hard to describe the sensation, but couldn't deny the amazing bond being forged between her and her baby in an act as old as time. Her eyes met Daryl's, and she swore she could see something like admiration shining through them. She gave him a soft smile, which he returned with his own.

Hershel beamed at the two brand new parents. "You two seem to be naturals at this." Beth smiled back at her father, and saw Daryl give a reluctant smirk at the compliment.

While Charlie nursed, Hershel asked Daryl what had happened to cause the alarms to go off. "Dunno if Maggie or anyone told y'all, but there were some prisoners holdin' out in the cafeteria. It's how we got all that food the other day. We cleared out another cell block for 'em, we got half of what was left in the kitchen. One of the guys came after Rick. Didn't go well for him. Another weasley guy ran off...he's the one who turned on the alarms. Asshole took out the generator before we could take him down."

"Everyone okay?" Hershel questioned.

Daryl shook his head. "Lost T-Dog. Can't find Carol, but I came looking for you first," then he paused, swallowing hard and hanging his head. "Lori's gone."

Beth gasped at the news, her eyes welling with tears. She tried to speak, to say anything at all, but no words would come. Thankfully, Hershel spoke up, "And the baby?"

Daryl nodded, "Maggie had to... Carl was with 'em. But the baby's alive."

Beth took a steadying breath, still unable to speak for the moment. Once Charlie had finished feeding and had fallen back asleep, Beth steeled herself for what she knew she had to do. "I need my boots...and my pants."

Daryl looked at her, mildly alarmed. "The hell're you goin'?" She was glad he was moving to get what she'd asked for, rather than fighting her.

"We're going back to the cell block," Beth declared, a quiet determination filling her, one neither of the men staring at her dared to question.

.oOo.

They made slow progress through the dark corridors of the prison, what with Beth only having delivered Charlie a few hours ago, and Hershel down to one crutch for the time being. As they turned corner after corner, trusting Daryl's sense of direction, they finally made their way back to find the rest of the group. The last few turns were guided more by the sounds of a baby crying than Daryl's memory.

As they entered the common area where everyone else was gathered, Maggie looked up and rushed over, wrapping her arms around Beth and their father. Relief washed over her features, followed by surprise and sheer joy. "Bethie," she whispered, gazing down at her nephew. "He's beautiful."

Beth took a short minute to introduce Charlie to his aunt, carefully transferring him to her arms, then gingerly walked over to where Carl was sitting. He was obviously trying to quiet his younger sibling, and not having much luck. She briefly wondered why Rick wasn't helping to calm the baby, then realized he was nowhere to be found. Still wrapped in Carl's flannel shirt, the poor thing was crying up a storm.

Her newly forged maternal instinct kicked in, knowing beyond a doubt what the baby needed. She knew for a fact that they hadn't been preparing for a tragedy like this to happen, that there weren't any cans of formula or bottles or anything to supplement feeding either of the babies. Beth sat down at the table, groaning a little in discomfort, but knew she had more pressing matters to contend with. "Carl," she said as delicately as she could, but making sure she could still be heard over the baby's cries. "Can I hold your...sister?" she guessed, sighing in relief when Carl nodded without correcting her. Lori had said plenty of times that this pregnancy had felt different than when she was carrying Carl, and had predicted that her second child would be a little girl.

Beth situated Lori's baby in her arms, trying futilely to quiet her cries. "I think she's hungry, Carl," she explained. "I'm just gonna take her to my cell and try to feed her." The young boy nodded solemnly. "I'll let you know when she's done, okay?" After another nod, Beth stood again, rocking the youngest of the Grimes family as she slowly walked to her cell. She'd had no issue feeding her son in front of Daryl and Hershel, but to try with such a big audience had her far outside her comfort zone.

As Lori's daughter nursed, Beth decided then and there that feeding her daughter was the least she could do to honor Lori, especially after all she had done to help Beth through her

own pregnancy. Lori had become a mother figure to Beth, a source of comfort in such a cruel and unforgiving world. Now Beth would be a mother figure to her daughter in return.

Daryl and Maggie joined Beth in the cell, both of them wearing similar expressions, like they each had a bandaid they were dreading tearing off. Daryl chose to stand, leaning against the gray brick wall adjoining the iron bars leading out; Maggie, still cradling her nephew, sat beside her sister.

“What?” Beth asked warily. The look the two gave each other was a sure sign that something was most definitely up.

“‘M goin’ on a run,” he mumbled. Beth could tell, from the tone of his voice, from the droop in his broad shoulders, maybe even just by the connection that had been growing between them, that leaving her right now was the absolute last thing Daryl wanted to do. “See if we can find anything to help - formula and bottles and stuff.”

“Besides,” Maggie added, “as adorable as these two are, we’re going to have to put them down to sleep sometime. We don’t have a crib or anything for either of them.”

Beth nodded in understanding. As they’d moved from place to place over the past several months, there hadn’t been room in the trucks or vans for any furniture or bulky packs of diapers, let alone clothes or cans of formula. Then Daryl’s words clicked in her brain. “You said you’d see if *we* could find something. Who’s we?”

“I’m going with him,” Maggie explained.

With a sigh, knowing that nothing she could say would change their minds, Beth accepted that two of the people she cared about most in the world would be leaving. She reminded herself that they all had jobs to do, and both Maggie and Daryl were more than capable of taking care of themselves. “Well,” she mentally shook herself, swallowing back any rebuttal to their plan, “I think this little girl is ready to go back to her brother.” She slowly got up off the bed - partly so she wouldn’t wake the sleeping baby in her arms (and possibly her son sleeping in Maggie’s) but mostly because she was more than sore and beyond exhausted.

Maggie moved faster, yet still gently, mindful of her sleeping nephew. “Here, Daryl,” she said softly as she positioned the baby in his arms before scooping Lori’s daughter into her own. “You stay put,” she directed at Beth, giving her a look that Beth knew meant any argument would not be entertained. “I’ll get this little one back to Carl.”

When the older Greene sister had left, Daryl sat carefully on the cot next to Beth, where they both marveled over their son in hushed awe, soaking up each tiny little breath, each tiny fidget from this tiny person they had made together. Beth had to focus her breathing to keep the tears at bay. Emotions were running high - joy, grief, fear - but she didn’t need to add to Daryl’s burden by unloading them on him.

Maggie returned a few moments later, with Glenn in tow. “Change of plans,” she announced.

Glenn looked at Beth and Daryl sitting together, “Daryl, you need to be here with your family. I’m going with Maggie. We’ll take the truck and load as much as we can to get you

through the next couple weeks at least.”

Beth moved as quickly and gracefully as she could manage to give Glenn a tight hug of thanks.

Beth and Maggie immediately began making a rough list of what the babies would need, from clothes to furniture to food, even including toys and foam mats to cover the concrete floors if there were any available. As Glenn and Maggie made ready to leave, Beth began to get teary eyed again, not willing to part with her sister just yet. Her common sense kicked in, and she had to fight the flood of hormones to keep herself from falling apart over something that was so necessary to be done.

Without any diapers yet, the only solution they’d found were some pillow cases they’d found in a storage closet to swaddle the babies in, changing them out as needed, at least for the time being. “They can always be washed out and used again,” Hershel reminded them all.

After Maggie and Glenn said their “see you later’s,” Beth called her father and Daryl into their cell again. “I’m worried about Carl,” she started. “But I don’t think I can keep my eyes open another minute. I’ll keep Charlie here with me...will you stay with Carl? Wake me up if she gets hungry again?”

The two men agreed, though she noticed Hershel was the one to head down to Carl’s cell while Daryl stayed, perched on the end of the bed while Beth scooted herself to lie down, curling herself around their son.

Her last thoughts before sleep found her were a little unsettling. Hershel knew plenty about raising babies (even if they were the four-legged kind), but he could only do so much in his condition. Rick was still MIA. Maggie and Beth only had experience babysitting, which was far different from child rearing. If something big were to happen - and Beth thanked her lucky stars that her brain was too tired to come up with a list of what could go wrong while raising a baby in the apocalypse - they’d need more help. It truly takes a village to raise a child, and their already small village had just gotten smaller.

A niggling thought tickled the back of her mind, but she was lost in slumber before it could fully take hold.

.oOo.

Beth woke from a too-short nap to an odd mix of sounds. Charlie was next to her, his arms having worked their way out of the pillow case she had used as a swaddle until Glenn and Maggie returned with baby supplies. He shook his tiny fists in the air as he began to grunt and fuss his displeasure at her. Beth sat up carefully, then changed the pillowcase out for a fresh one. When that didn’t stop his cries, she brought him to her chest to nurse, which instantly calmed her infant son. She smiled down at him as he fed, feeling the love swelling through her heart again, always stronger than she could have ever imagined.

As her brain continued to wake up and gain its bearings, she realized several things at once. One, Judith would probably be hungry again very soon. Two, Daryl was no longer in the cell with them, which was strongly indicated to be true because, three, she could hear several

voices arguing in the corridor just outside her cell - and one of those voices carried a distinct gravelly Southern twang. Confused and a little concerned, Beth did her best to focus on feeding Charlie and making sure he was set before gingerly standing up from the bed - a feat that proved far more difficult than she remembered from just a few hours ago. Perhaps her adrenaline rush from the birth was still pushing her along through those winding dark hallways when Daryl led her and her father back to the rest of the group. Now that she'd had a chance to rest, its effects had most certainly worn off and her body was more than reluctant to move.

In the early evening light, she found Glenn, Maggie, and Daryl arguing over what looked like an unfolded diagram, each of them holding pieces of polished wood, all different lengths.

"It says here piece L goes into slot 5."

"You're looking at it sideways. It's piece I and it goes into slot 2."

"But guys, we don't know which screws to use anyway. Don't we need to figure that out first?"

"They're bolts, dummy, not screws, and anyone can tell it's the ones with the flanges."

"This crib has phalanges?"

Glenn's alarmed question had Maggie in a fit of giggles and Daryl scowling in confusion, which led to Beth catching a laugh behind her smile. She'd never want Daryl to think she was laughing at him. She couldn't blame him; besides, he just didn't seem the FRIENDS fan type of guy.

Beth walked to her father, who was sitting and chuckling to himself as he watched the three argue. He smiled at her before reaching over to smooth his thumb over his grandson's cheek, looking proud as could be and just as enamored with Charlie as she was. "What's going on?" she ventured to ask with a confused smile.

"Cribs," Hershel replied and gestured toward the warehouse's worth of cardboard boxes lining the opposite wall of the common area. "Complete with changing tables. Next I think they said they'd work on the swings, strollers, and toybox. But," he continued with another chuckle, "they have to survive the cribs first."

Beth let out her own soft laugh as she returned her attention to the three still arguing over which piece belonged where. Ordinarily, she would have offered to help. Today, however, she was going to sit back and watch. Let someone who hadn't just given birth deal with it. A moment later, she saw Carl coming out of his own cell, carrying his sister, who was a much grumpier riser than Charlie, apparently. Angry cries rang through the common area.

After carefully transitioning Charlie into his grampa's arms, Beth took Carl's sister to an empty cell to feed her. A twinge of sadness, which she reckoned would never really disappear, crossed her heart as she looked at Lori's daughter. "She looks just like you," she whispered to...Lori's memory? Her spirit? Beth promised herself, and the same presence she

felt, that this baby girl would come to know her mother, even if it was only through other's memories.

In the quiet of the cell, her mind began to wander. She hoped with all her heart that Rick would come back to his family sooner rather than later so he could get to know this last piece of Lori's heart. Beth wondered and worried how long it would be for the man to work through his grief. She couldn't imagine losing someone after loving them so deeply.

Yes, Lori had told Beth of the ups and downs of their relationship throughout the years they'd been together - maybe as a way of empathizing when Daryl had been distant in the months before they'd found the prison - but when she saw them together, the love between Lori and Rick may have been strained, but it was there, unwavering.

Would her relationship with Daryl ever reach that kind of depth? The kind that her own parents shared? Or even what she saw blossoming between Maggie and Glenn?

When Beth carried the baby back to the common area, she asked Carl to find another pillow case to wrap her in. He had just taken a step to begin his search when Maggie stopped him. "These babies will *not* be wrapped in bedding," she announced adamantly as she crawled to her feet and led Carl to another part of the large room. Beth glanced at her father, still cuddling and cooing over his grandson before he nodded his head after the other two, indicating she needed to follow them.

What she found was a mountain of diapers of all sizes and bags upon bags that were apparently filled to bursting with clothes for all ages and seasons. Next were boxes of wipes, creams and lotions, toys, books...an epic baby shower if Beth had ever seen or even imagined one. There were even a set of matching bassinets, baby monitors, and cases of baby formula and everything needed to go with it.

Beth looked at her big sister with wide eyes that were filling easily with tears and a mouth that had fallen open. "Hey," Maggie replied to her expression. "I might not have been the best baby sitter, but I remember all the stuff Mama needed when you came along. So I went a little off the list and splurged," she said with a shrug. Her grin turned a little wicked as she whispered out of Carl's ear shot, "Besides, with as scarce as condoms have been, there aren't likely to be more babies needing this stuff anyway." Beth swatted her sister's arm before watching her return to the crib construction site.

Beth gave Carl a crash course in how to change diapers and picked a cute onesie and blanket to cover his little sister, then grabbed the same for Charlie. When they returned to the rest of the group, the "builders" had put together most of one crib. Maggie and Glenn had started on the second while Daryl attached the shelves and the changing table to the first.

"Not to distract anyone from their work," Beth said as she got as comfortable as she could on one of the hard plastic chairs the prison afforded, "but where did all of this come from? How did it all fit in the van?"

"Van?" Glenn questioned with a laugh. "Are you kidding? I mean, yeah, Maggie had me take out all the seats in the van to make as much room as possible, but then I got to drive the RV. We found a daycare center real close by, which had some stuff...formula, bottles, and diapers

and whatever. To be honest, it was too damn depressing to go through much of it. Stumbled on a Target a couple miles out of town. It was just off by itself...well, across the street from a car dealership. Anyway, that's where we got the rest of this." He looked around for a moment, stretching his lower back and shaking out his legs before setting back to work on the second crib.

This new information slowly sank into Beth's exhausted brain. She remembered their group avoiding the big box stores. While they were sure to have the highest reward in terms of supplies, they also carried the highest risk. She wanted to scold them for putting themselves in such danger, that they should have stopped when they found the basics at the daycare. They could have gotten by alright; people were having babies long before automated swings and baby monitors.

Maggie must have recognized the look on Beth's face. "Don't even start," she warned. "These babies deserve the best of what this world can give them, which really isn't much. You all are going to have a hard enough time as it is. So we did what any proud aunt and uncle would do and went all out. You want us to return it?" She raised an eyebrow at that, daring Beth to argue.

"Of course not," Beth sighed. "And of course I'm grateful for everything. When we made that list, I hadn't even dreamt of half the stuff you two brought back. I just...I'm glad you're both okay."

Having finished the changing table, Daryl set to work putting the much smaller (and less complicated) bassinets together, then moved them to their cells. There still hadn't been any sign of Rick. Glenn must have noticed his prolonged absence; once the second crib was complete (which was a remarkably faster process than the first), he grabbed a flashlight and his weapon and entered the corridor they had last seen Rick walk towards. Close to an hour later, he returned - alone - and told the group that he'd found Rick, that he was alive, but (after a glance at Carl) that he needed more time to work through everything.

Beth tried to change the subject to a more hopeful topic. "So, have you thought of a name for her?"

Carl shook his head. "Not yet. I was thinking maybe Sophia? It's nice. Carol, too."

The slight lift in mood had been just as brief. As Carl continued his list of possible names - all women from their group that they'd lost - they were all reminded just how cruel this new world could be.

"What do you think, huh?" Daryl asked the infant girl in a soft, light voice that Beth had only heard when he had greeted his son. "Lil ass-kicker?" He looked up as the other adults chuckled at the nickname. "Right? It fits her, don't it?"

Beth rolled her eyes, but smiled when she saw Carl grinning down at his sister. Knowing her parents and who would be raising her, the baby was sure to live up to the name.

Chapter End Notes

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